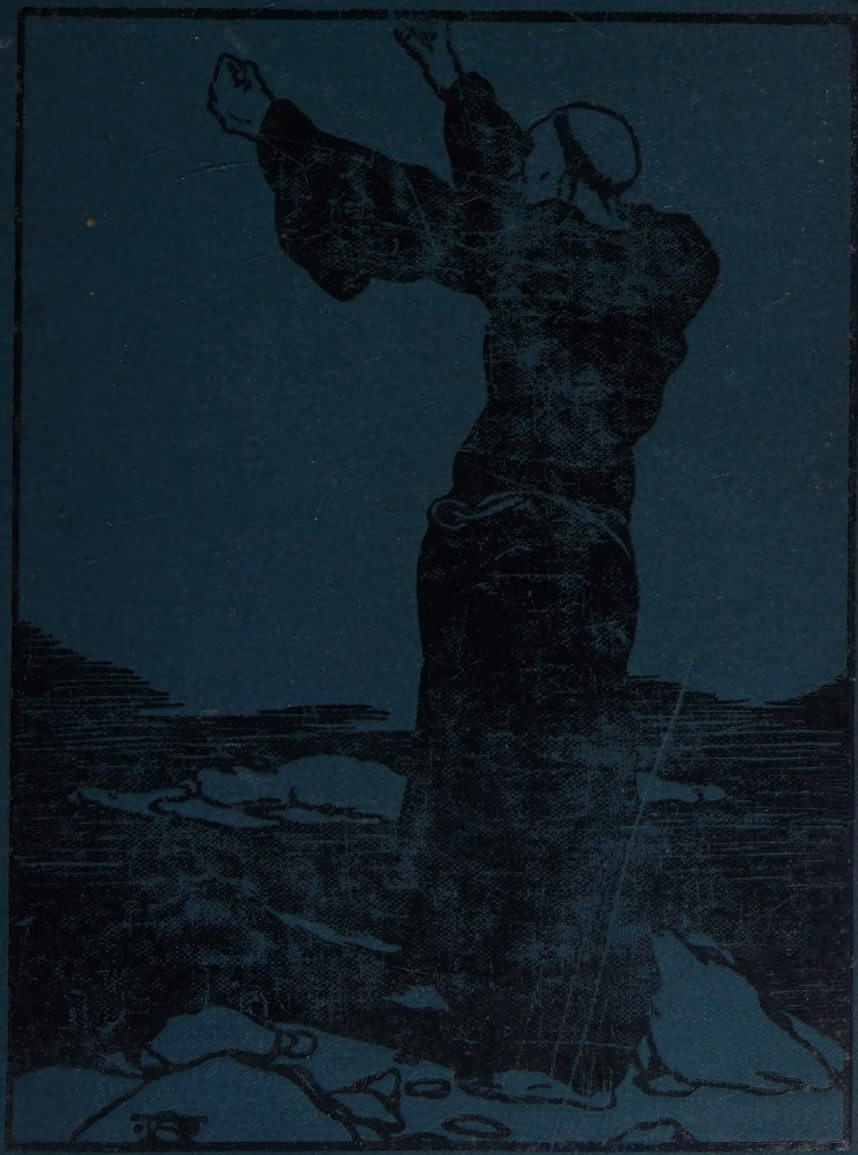
THE SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE



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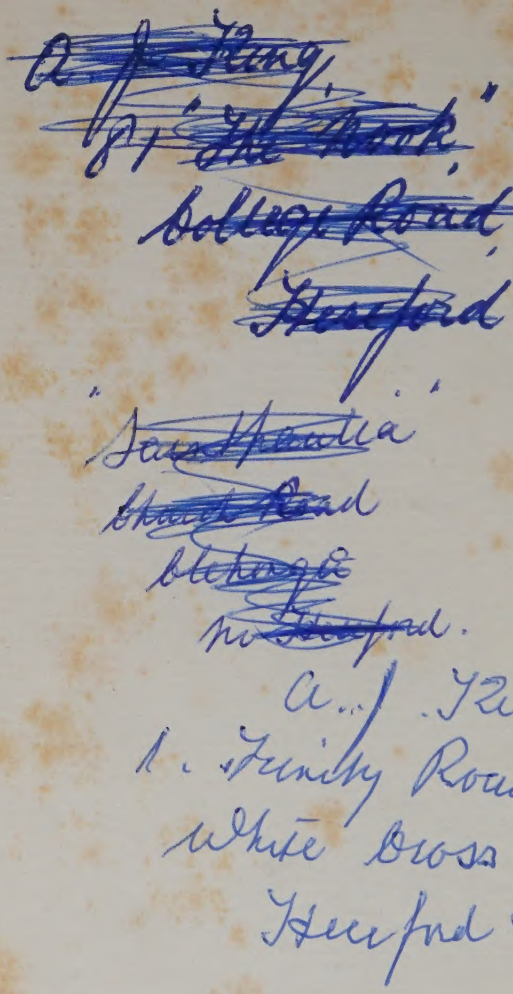

THE SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE

BY THE SAME WRITER

PLAYS FROM ENGLISH HISTORY

STUDIES IN RHYME AND RHYTHM

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS (*First Series*)

SONGS FROM THE CLASSICS (*Second Series*)

THE SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE

BY

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THE COVER DESIGN BY
AUSTIN O. SPARE

LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS
M CM IX

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NOTE

This book was printed locally in 1887. *Although the edition was all sold, and the work was still in demand, it was never re-issued, nor was the Author able to get it back into his own hands until the present year. While in substance the book remains as it was first written, it has been so much revised in detail as almost to constitute a new work.*

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THE SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE

PROLOGUE

THE RAGGEDSTONE is a strange-looking, double-peaked hill at the southern end of the Malvern Range, and a weird legend clings to it. This legend sets forth that the doom of death or disaster attends whomsoever the shadow of the hill falls upon, and there is evidence to show that at certain times a very peculiar shadow (more resembling a heavy cloud) *does* fall, though Science gives a different explanation of the phenomenon from that favoured by the believers, if any such remain, in the legend. The latter, be its interpretation what it might, had long excited in me an interest which grew to be enthralling; and I had somehow, I scarce know why, come to associate it in my fancy with that other tragical episode belonging to the same County, which readers of history will remember to have been a moving spring in the great quarrel between the famous Thomas à Becket and the First Plantagenet. It was not until a short time ago, however, and after years of vain searching, that I came upon a solution of the enigma.

One late Autumn day, after a long walk, I had been smoking my pipe in the little village inn of Birts Morton—the place more particularly said to be haunted by the Shadow—and, according to my wont, plying with questions on my favourite subject a couple of plain countrymen, who presently, I suppose to escape my persecution, betook themselves to the road outside. It was at this juncture that my only other companion now left in the room, a gentleman who had all this while been quietly seated in the window-sconce without uttering a word, suddenly came to my help, and with results I had little reckoned on. Seemingly struck by my unusual interest in the matter, this gentleman, whose name I presently learned was Aldrich, at once entered with me upon the topic I had broached, and in the course of a long conversation which followed informed me that he was the direct descendant of the hero of the legend, the latter having been a monk of the Benedictine Priory of Little Malvern, an Establishment situated scarce more than a mile from the weird hill itself.

My new acquaintance further gave me to understand that at all times the chief, if not the only, victims of the baneful Shadow had been *Priests*, the sole exception to this rule being his own family, one or more members of which had in every generation been subject to the fatal summons; and he related to me several instances in his own experience, including his father, and later on his wife and eldest child, who had thus been visited and stricken. I found him, indeed, to be in gloomy expectation of a similar visitation on himself, and perhaps, what he feared far more, on his only remaining child—a fine little boy to whom he afterwards introduced me, and

whom he called, with a melancholy semblance of mirth, the "last of the Alderics," that being, he said, the ancient spelling of their name; yet so strange a hold had the mysterious doom, as he believed it to be, upon him, that he seemed unable to make any effort to avoid what he thus dreaded, a happy issue which I thought he might readily enough have brought about by flying from the place and the fell cloud that hung over it. When I suggested as much to him, however, he only shook his head, and said with a smile that he also often wondered why none of his ancestors had fled the place; but they had not, and as it had been with them, so, he supposed, would it be with him. "Perhaps," he added, "this, too, was a part of the fate."

As for the *appearance* itself, my companion had only once seen it, on the occasion preceding his father's death, and he described it to me as a black columnar cloud which rose up from between the two peaks of the hill, hanging over the scared gazers, and slowly following them, as they walked back home, until they had reached the very gate of their house; but to his wife and child it had, or they had fancied that it had, assumed a more definite shape, resembling, they declared, a cowled monk; and the little boy, in particular, had cried out on first seeing it that it was "just like the monk's figure in the picture-book." In this instance the summons had proved fatal to *both* of those who chanced, if chance it were, to be present, but Mr. Aldrich affirmed that such was not of necessity the case, as his own experience had shown; and a singular forbearance, almost consideration, appeared to have been ever exercised by the malignant cloud as regarded the unlucky

race it especially made its mark, by which it happened that the latter had never suffered complete extinction, and that the Shadow had always possessed, as my friend put it, "one of the Alderic blood to witness for it."

In connection with the mysterious choice of its other victims by the weird Shadow, a point already hinted at in our conversation, and the reason for which I later on came to understand, Mr. Aldrich mentioned to me the strange dislike entertained at all times by his family towards *Priests*, more particularly those of the Church of Rome, but, in a less degree, those also of the Church of England. In every quarrel in which the ruling Church was concerned some member of his family, he averred, had ever lent a hand, and always on the side opposed to the Clerics, a fact the more notable as, except on such occasions, the Alderics had resolutely held themselves aloof from meddling in public affairs. This antipathy by all the members of the race to the Priesthood seemed, as their descendant said (who himself owned to as much of the inheritance as would cover a prejudice), to be "born with the very blood in them." Strictly speaking, the above peculiarities refer only to my new friend's *branch* of the family tree, which branch was, as will be seen in the records that follow, abruptly separated in the 12th century from the parent stem, never again to have any union with the latter, which, indeed, by a certain irony of fate, it was destined to outlive.

Finding how deeply I was interested in the mystery, Mr. Aldrich was good enough to add to the information he had given me by taking me to his own house—a very ancient one,

and originally built by his singular ancestor's son—and there showing me a manuscript relating to the subject, which he explained had been recently discovered in a disused lumber room.*

This manuscript, which was clearly written in the fine style of the 12th century, and, what was more remarkable, in the common language of the time, gave a detailed account of all the circumstances attending the weird legend, and was apparently the work of one who was well acquainted with the chief personages of the history, if not an intimate friend of the strange hero himself. In addition, there were numerous notes, evidently penned by different hands and at various periods, dotted over the margins and even upon the cover of the ancient record, some of which, as I afterwards found, threw a useful light on certain obscure parts of the main history. These, together with a few faint echoes of the legend yet lingering in the family atmosphere, my host was wont to speak of as "tradition," in contradistinction to the regular memoirs chronicled in the sheets of the old parchment.

It is this manuscript, kindly lent to me by Mr. Aldrich for the purpose, which I have here transcribed, as well as I have been able, into more modern English, and which I now venture to offer to the public as the true solution of a mystery that has long interested many beside myself, but which has hitherto baffled all the inquiries of the curious.

* A detailed account of the finding of this MS. by his wife and eldest child, and their previous visitation by the weird Shadow, together with a history of Mr. Aldrich's family, is contained in a longer "Prologue," written immediately after the interview I have described, from which the one now given is compressed.

BOOK I

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

CHAPTER I

A MORAL IN MIST

At the southern end of the Malvern Range—being, indeed, the last peak of the chain, save one, in that direction—stands the hill which gives a title to this story. Apart from the weird legend which hangs about it, it is probable that it would be regarded as a strange-looking hill by any traveller who chanced to cross it in his wanderings. Few who visit the bright little watering-place which nestles under the northern peaks of the chain ever make acquaintance with the freer graces of these hills where they break off and come to a sudden halt at their southern limit. Here nature has—at least, in a greater degree—been left to her own humour. A remnant of the old Forest, which once covered the eastern plain below, yet clings to the rough slopes, and streams still trickle down the fern-swept gullies which run up between and divide the branching spurs and double-peaked summits. Solitude, too, is present, as profound as in some wilder region; and, undisturbed by voice or

footfall, you may dream over the grey-stoled Past, and muse on that far-off race, looming just in front of the misty sentinels of notched Time, who lived here once, and made these strange trenches you are walking in and wondering at—*their* notches in the gnarled trunk of History—their dumb-part in the prologue to *our* unfinished drama in the many-staged Theatre of this ever-playing World. Gone are they, rolled away like the morning mist, and the dewdrops on the turf that covers their handiwork give not the least reflection of them. The arms that delved so deeply here are turned to aimless dust, to which the winds of heaven whisper but stir no answer from: the tongues that made so brave a sound in the Roman ears—where, in what farthest corner of unvoyaged Space, echo they now? Vanished are the actors, and their very ghosts have gone with them. All is silent that could speak of them: History only keeps a blank page, to be filled with random guesses, for them: if they stir at all, they rustle but in the outermost skirt of this world's immortality: inexorably Time's tidal-wave has washed over them, or borne them back again; and has left no painted spar to be cast upon the shoreline—at least, no figurehead, nor stern-plank with the name of the port they sailed from—to be a guide for posterity or a memory to their children.

So the human feet are for ever impressing the sands of human history; sometimes the fresh ones stepping on and treading out those there before them, sometimes but partly so, sometimes choosing new places, and leaving the old marks untrampled on—to tell their own mute tale, which the least nail or sprig, or but the bare heel or toe of them, fails not to

do, more or less eloquently. The old Roman half steps on the older Grecian, and that one on the erst Assyrian, Persian —what not? And in yonder corner, aside, unnoted by the passing tramp, those strange tokens of feet which spring from the very cave and centre of darkness, whose echo, even, has ceased to whisper, or whispers not to human ears, in the hushed wind-waves of far infinitude.

Yet the human voice sings ever to its own music: man's theme was always the same: his blood ran the same nimble course since the channel was given to its flow: always his soul looked above him, his mind roved around him, his passions surged and set—he proved joy, and sorrow, and sin: the riddle of him is eternal; and so long as wit and breath are left him to make guesses, he will labour to find the answer to his own puzzle.

Therefore, O finder of old footprints on the shore of human history, O discoverer of old records of man's pleasure and pain, do not tread out the one with thy feet, or throw back the other to its dust-heap, because the form of this shoe is not like that which thou wearest, or because the manner of this writing is different from thine own fashion; nor, moreover, because the ink of it has become faded. The foot whose mark thou lookest on would, within any shoe, have moved to the heart's drum-beat just as doth thine own—as slowly, as fervidly—in all hap, as uncertainly—as dost thou, and every other man, in the mist and sunlight of this chequered world; and the hand which wrote that writing—what were ink and style, and the letters that went with them, but mere accidents like unto thine own accidents? Certain only, as with thee, and all of thy

kind here, were the joy and sorrow, and the good and evil they gave birth to, or were born of; which are the same to-day as they were yesterday; and will be, while man stays to take measure for eternity.

Therefore, in that age, the records of which (or rather, one record of it) we are going to essay the spelling of—if we listen aright, shall not the human voice sound as clearly—the stir of the strife, the battle-strains of good and evil, the chorus-cry of joy and sorrow—shall not that song of the Past sound as clear to us as the music of this Present—this orchestra in which ourselves play an instrument? It is the same music: it is one wave of the great human sea whose tide sets for Eternity; and though it beats yet far off in middle ocean, the moonlight falls on it as on these nearer ones—as on this nearest of all, which is lapping round the feet of us where we are standing on the shore and watching its scarce-to-be-reckoned flow—onward and ever onward—to join its fellows and become a lake, waveless, at least stormless, in the still twilight of everlasting Summer.

CHAPTER II

A SHADOW WITHOUT A SHAPE

As I take up these old memorials, and spell through their strange-fashioned characters—strange to me, that is: once plain enough, and modern enough, to themselves—nay, as I dig, mole-like, past the outer turf (dead and dry) of them, and

get at the soil underneath—I find myself slipping out of Time's shackles: the soil looks not very different from that of our own earth-plot, neither seems so great the distance that lies between us: the voices that come across it have the same sound as ours, and I join my part to their chorus without a thought of making discord: I touch even their instruments, and the music is not strange to me—I make no discovery—it is the music common to humanity.

On the first sheet of these same memorials I find it related that upon a certain Autumn afternoon in Eleven Hundred and ——, the year is undecipherable, two monks of the Order of St. Benedict were riding together down the lonely hill pass, or gully, which divides the Raggedstone from the ancient camp on its northern side.

My record (unlike the modern novel) gives no very accurate account of the personal attributes of these two travellers: it hints little or nothing as to the colour of their hair or eyes, their "strength of chin," their "firm yet sensitive mouth," or, indeed, anything; and their appearance and character, as is the case also with the other personages in the history, have to be judged mainly from the actions that are assigned to them, and the influence of these on their after conduct. One of these travellers, then (whose conventual name is presently revealed to us as Bernard, or "Brother Bernard"), I gather to have been tall in presence, of well-formed, muscular make, rather suggesting the steel dress of the soldier than the monk's travelling-gown that encircled him; and with a countenance comely and noble, but no more monastical in its appearance than was his person,

save for a slight cloud of melancholy which overhung and darkened it.

On one point the writer of this history, whoever he may have been, does deign to enlighten us—namely, that both the travellers were young; though here, also, he is vague, and again leaves us to guess, perhaps deeming the point to be of small importance—at all events to monks.

What, however, was of importance, whether to monks or men, was the changed appearance of the atmosphere, as our two travellers, struck by the sudden sense of gloom, paused in their talk and looked around them, before guiding their mules down the rough track which led to the valley below.

I confess it was no small relief to me to learn that our Chronicler does not here mean to indicate that ancient offspring of scenic invention—a thunderstorm. Something quite different is in this instance hinted at. No loud peals rumbled among the near or distant peaks: no lurid flashes cracked the scared face of the firmament, cowering beneath its dark tempest-cloak: no lightning-lashing rain-blasts drove man or beast to sheltering rock or tree, soon to drive them forth again in despair of finding a hiding-place from the Storm-fiend. Nothing of all this was present. There was no stir, no motion, no open and declared revolution of Nature's forces. A more malignant scheme, it appeared, was plotting in the air, a subtler horror, by which the World was to be cowed. The furies of the Tempest did not frighten you with their contending voices—they frightened you by their silence. There was no sound in this terror, but it was not the less terrifying. The *ghosts* of the storm seemed to stalk dumbly

amid the shrinking forms of Life, which trembled and turned aside, they scarce understood why. In the overburdened stillness Nature might have been asleep: or rather, she might have been dead; and the World looking on—desolate as a stopped clock—breathless, stirless, agonised—holding mute funeral-rites over its lost mistress—hushed and paralysed out of motion—frozen henceforth from utterance in a broken universe.

Like the rest of creation, the two monks were startled, almost stifled, by the strange aspect of the altered world. This aspect was indeed wonderful—such as one may imagine, and has once been depicted, to have been the appearance of Egypt when lying under the doom of the Tenth Plague. The whole atmosphere—the entire heavens and earth hidden beneath it—seemed of one even, fiery grey, and all the living things in or on them, and themselves also, appeared to hold their breath and to stand still, or move uneasily, as though life were for the time suspended, and the motions of Nature checked, in the volcano-vapours that were distilling through and around them.

This general uneasiness of Nature, moreover, seemed to communicate itself alike to objects animate and inanimate. The hills loomed out in the murky atmosphere like misty-limbed giants, though in reality no mist hung about them; while the ancient Thorns on their sides looked shrivelled and blasted, witch-like, as if trying to shrink further into themselves to escape from torture that was pursuing them. In strange contrast, the sturdy bosses of golden-flamed gorse, dotted over the slopes, shone with an unnatural light, lurid

and dusky as gipsy fires on a waste heath. Here and there, some bewildered bird flew uncertainly from tree to tree, never resting long, flying always from it knew not what; and stray bands of sheep moved restlessly from place to place—now slowly, now quicker—with an air of amazed distress to which the wonted discomfort of shepherd and dog would almost have brought relief.

The world beyond, the wooded plain below, seemed likewise under the common spell. The wide valley had shrunk or rolled into a pigmy of its former self, by a metamorphosis vague, shapeless, fathomless. It was not exactly mist: it was like a transparent shroud, a partly-buried body—more properly, a divided body, each half fashioned complete, and the one half hid away out of sight—more properly still, a buried soul, with the body left above ground, ghostlike, purposeless, distorted—an abortion of Earth and Nature.

Distortion, indeed, was everywhere and in everything. No object looked like itself, but always either shrunken or magnified, either blurred or unnaturally distinct. With light, colour, sound—all the common senses of Nature—a phantasmal indefiniteness, an unearthly neutrality, had supervened. It was like the blending of two worlds—Life and Death, Earth and Hell, mingling on the battle-ground, which shuddered blindly under their strange treaty-tread—in which nothing retained its own, but a new World, a new atmosphere, new sensations, therefore, were engendered, but always weird, unwont, painful—to which whatever survived of the old Nature could not adapt itself. The World and its atmosphere appeared to have lost the rudder-lines of time and season,

and to be drifting at random in some chartless channel of an unknown void. None of the familiar signs seemed present by which the course of Life's vessel through its accustomed waters could be recognised. Nothing was as it had been—usual, natural, common. It was neither hot nor cold, light nor dark, night nor day—only an unnatural union—a fantastic mingling—a nightmare presence, or ghost-haunted absence—of them all.

For some time the two witnesses of this strange scene sat motionless and in silence, gazing fixedly upon it. Then the second of them, who was evidently the most affected by the phenomenon, turned and spoke to his fellow-traveller, the one known in the monkish nomenclature as "Brother Bernard."

"By our Lady," he said, bending over his saddle to escape the sight before him, and crossing himself with devotion, "never have I looked on the like of this! I believe, brother, it is no mortal scene. Either the Devil is let loose to vex the Earth, or verily the World is at its end."

"And, by our Lady, I am almost glad of it," replied the monk appealed to. "Any change from our present life would be welcome. It would need a worse appearance than this to scare me from throwing my cap to it, or rather——"

"Hush, brother, thou dost frighten me!" exclaimed the first speaker, in a voice that plainly showed his terror. "Thou knowest not what is behind these vapours, nor what shape may appear to take up thy challenge."

"And if I did," said his companion, rising higher in his saddle, and stretching out his hand before him—"why, the

very name of 'challenge' stirs all this sluggish blood into ripe humour. I warrant thee, if any shape that a man might meet were to rise up here and front us, and I had as proper weapons as it, I would give it good measure for contentment!"

"Speak not so, brother, I entreat thee!" answered the other monk, more than ever moved with fright at this rash defiance of their unknown peril. "It is awful, in this place, with this evil terror hanging over us, to hear thee talk of such things, and we chosen ministers of Heaven.—Look below there, brother. Holy Saints guard us! I have scarce the courage to venture down into it. It is like riding into the black vapours of Hell!"

"I fear it not," returned the bolder monk with a gesture of disdain. "Am I not weary—weary to the very soul of all things? I tell thee, Clement, were it even what thou dreadest in thy child's terror—and I wot 'tis nothing but a kind of storm-blight begotten of cross winds—it would hold no fears for me. Nay, rather, as I just said to thee, I should almost welcome the peril of it as a change from the dulness of our present life, to escape which I would dare more than thou dreamest."

"But, good Brother Bernard——"

"Call me Cuthbert," broke in the other impatiently: "I am tired of that dead Saint's name, which putteth me in mind of my ill destiny. Let those who borrowed it so title me, if it please them; but thou, who art my brother by our own liking, my chosen friend out of yonder herd of penned servitors—I would have thee call me as I was baptized, by the name my parents thought good enough for my need."

"I know well that thou art dissatisfied, brother," replied the monk called Clement, "but I doubt thy wisdom in giving the reins to thine ill-humour. The world thou wouldst mingle with is not happier than ourselves, and we, at least, walk more surely towards that greater happiness which all men hope to reach. Methinks, brother, our path is the better."

"But it is not *life*," cried his companion hotly. "It is not a path, as thou callest it. Call it rather a pen, a prison; for on a path a man walks as it pleaseth him, but *our* feet move only as they are bidden, and at the motion of another's mind. We are slaves, Clement, put what cloak on it thou wilt; and I say I came not into the world for this only. I have motions of mine own—of body, and of mind also; and I desire room and freedom to give them play in. Ay, and if it chanced so, they would burst through yonder cloister like a fledged fowl out of an eggshell!"

"Thou hadst best give no hint of thy hatching to the good Prior yonder, or he may add a cover to thy shell," said Clement with a smile. "Our Reverend Father hath not much zeal for the freedom thou dost long after, and I doubt if he would give thee a larger room for it."

"I only talk to thee," answered the young monk gloomily; "I am not fool enough to run my head against a stone wall.—But come, let us get out of this hell-blight. By the Saints, I wonder not at thy fears. It would scare even a ghost from his vigil, and thou—thou hast the fancy of a green girl, may our holy Benedict forgive me for naming such a thing to thee!"

Calling forth all the courage he possessed, Brother Clement

gave the rein to his mule; and, slowly winding their way down the rough track, the two monks were presently lost in the shrouded valley below—not so much dissolving piecemeal from the view, as being suddenly swallowed up by the strange maw of the atmosphere, which, after a certain point in the distance, seemed to open its jaws and snap them to again on whatever chanced to come within reach of its crocodile-like mouth and teeth.

CHAPTER III

THE SUNBEAM IN THE SHADOW

Soon the two monks passed from the weird shadow of the hills, and entered the more even gloom of the forest underwood. The old Forest of Malvern—then a royal demesne, not yet made a Chace and given over to the Earls of Gloucester—spread across a great part of the wide valley which stretches between these hills and the Severn, and on past it, to that other fair stream whose waters ever swelled proudly "with glad prophetic sense of fame to come."

Only a few witnesses now remain, like grave-stones, or rather, like death-spared mourners, of buried History, to point a finger to that broad woodland which once waved here, a breeze-stirred ocean of greenery: only a very few, scattered at far intervals through the bright meadows—ancient derelicts, dazzled with the glare, and disconsolate in their loneliness,

like strange memories out of date—sentinels still faithful to their posts: great oaks, mostly, with battered fronts, and withered limbs, and the hearts mouldered out of them, but magnificent in their last stand against Time and the Tempest.

But at this period, when Henry Plantagenet was king, and only beginning his stout quarrel with the Priest Becket, these leafy veterans were yet youngsters of the Forest, and with their brother saplings, and full-limbed lords and sires, looked out upon the dense thickets, or peeped in at the broad open glades, where the streams ran unminded, and the ferns grew and gathered, and the deer played or were hunted, and the old order ruled without a thought. Often, looking back, as all age will, into the far-away of youth and the twilight Past, they can hear again, it may be, the King's horn blowing up on the fresh morning breeze, still catch the lusty baying of the dogs, and the deep snort of the startled stag; mark, too, the laughter, the jests, sometimes the love-whisperings and janglings, that woke the sleepy stillness of those woodland wastes so many years now gone.

Perchance, too, on that Autumn afternoon of the Twelfth Century, through whose mists we are labouring to travel, one or more of these same veterans, then mere juveniles, may have listened to the conversation of our two monks, may even have felt the brush of their passing cloaks, as the Brothers slowly rode along the rough forest paths, making for the little Priory which lay just beyond the skirts of the wood.

If these old Confessors of the Forest had indeed listened to the discourse of the two friends, they would have caught nothing more than a continuation of the same theme already

confided to the discretion of the hill-track above: they would but have overheard the monk Clement striving still, and still vainly, to exorcise that demon of discontent which had got possession of his companion's soul, and was seemingly resolved on keeping it.

"I would I could move thee from thy present thoughts," Clement was saying earnestly, "for I fear they will lead thee to great peril. Thou shouldst have weighed these matters ere thou didst take on thee thy vows. But it is now too late. Thou canst not throw from thee this habit thou wearest as a snake casteth its skin."

"I know that," answered the monk Bernard bitterly. "Thou givest me good comfort, Clement! As for those vows thou speakest of, what choice had I in the choosing? Was I not moulded and cast in yonder cloister? Was an end ever shown me but this? Was I taught to look anywhere save to it? What knew I of life else, when I took those same vows thou dost remind me of? What I know, I have learned since; and if 'twere guessed of in our prison there, I should pay no light price for my schooling!"

"But thou canst not alter it," said Clement. "Is it not wiser to use our neck to the burthen we cannot shake from it, rather than be ever fraying the skin with vain strivings after freedom? Thou canst not shift this burthen from thee, Cuthbert."

"I know not," returned the other. "There is a knife for most cords, and a freedom from most fetters. But thou art so far right, that this is the hardest knot to be quit of that ever man or devil fashioned."

"Thou art mad!" exclaimed Clement, glancing round him in affright. "If the Prior or one of our Brethren were to hear thee, thou wouldst be sorry for thy rash speech."

"For our Reverend Prior, yes; but for the Brethren, save only thy worthy self, I am not so sure," replied Bernard with a laugh. "They are as much men as monks, though they have the wit to pretend they have forgotten it."

"I know thou dost not mean what thou speakest," said Clement. "Thy heart is truer than thy tongue, or I should like thee less. But where is thy discontent? Doubtless thou art of another kind than I, for I love this life well enough, and do not find that weariness thou complainest of."

"Weariness!" cried Bernard, stopping his mule a moment that he might gaze at his companion. "Art thou a man at all, then? Or hath yonder tomb swallowed up thy grosser part, and left thee an angel? Perchance, if it be so, thou art the happier for it. But to speak of weariness! Why, what change of suit have we, from this year's dawn to next year's setting, by which a man may know yesterday from the day after it? Saints above! Weariness? I tell thee, the hours have no breath to name their dulness! Only reckon it, Clement. Why—mark thou: what with lauds, and prime, and tierce, and sext, and nones, and vespers, and compline; to say nothing of extra nocturns and canticles, and, more than all, those dreary lections in the refectory, which steal the hunger from one's stomach, or fill us with gaping wind, and to which our labour in the Prior's farm and the cleared lands is mere play of Paradise—why, with all these—tell me, man—what corner hath a soul left on the free scroll Heaven gave to

it, that it may find room to scribble a line for itself, and die?"

For reply, the serious face of Clement broke into a smile, quickly followed by an uncanonical burst of laughter, as he pointed to a wide glade in the wood, which their track opened into and crossed before resuming its course on the opposite side.

"Thou hast an answer here ready to thy question," he said. "It seems that all our hours are not spent after the manner thou hast portrayed, more especially as concerneth the refectory."

"What meanest thou?" asked Bernard, looking towards the place indicated, and not over-pleased at the interruption. "Why—by the living Saints—if it is not that old measure of hypocrisy, Brother Hubert himself; and—soul of Benedict! with his arm round the waist of a woman. Look at him, Clement!" he added, rolling on his mule with laughter. "There's a picture for our lord the Prior to wink at! I would he were now here to share the sight with us!"

The scene which the two monks had burst upon was, in truth, one to move either mirth or astonishment. The open glade before them was occupied by a party of some half-dozen rough-looking swineherds, grouped over the ground in every attitude of abandoned ease, and all more or less engaged in the enjoyment of a huge flagon of wine, which was busily passed from mouth to mouth during the intervals undevoted to a large pasty laid out on a grassy mound in their midst. A fat monk, with a rosy face and merry twinkling eyes, not much suggestive of the cloister, was seated

in the place of honour; and by his side lolled a buxom dame, neither very young nor ill-looking, who looked up at him with an expression of bibulous freedom diverting enough to a spectator. At the moment when the monks came upon the scene, her companion, with one arm clasped lovingly round her, and his disengaged hand holding the flagon to her mouth, was urging her with great warmth not to stint her measure—a hospitable charge hardly needed by its fair object, who had apparently proved no coyer to the cup than to the cupbearer.

"Good greeting, Reverend Brother Hubert!" Bernard called out to him, when the two intruders had at last got the reins of their laughter. "Say, my brother: what fair penitent hast thou got here? By our Lady, however she hath tripped, thou appearest to have given her consolation."

"*Father* Hubert, thou shouldst have said, brother," replied the jolly ecclesiastic addressed, not a whit abashed by this discovery of his relaxation. "Thou forgettest that respect which our Reverend Founder—God content him!—enjoineth on younger Brethren to show their elders. Beware, young man, lest thou come under a condemnation!"

This speech was delivered so much after the common manner of drunken men, that the two monks were again moved to laughter. Clement, however, was not long in resuming his wonted gravity, and, his first burst of merriment over, appeared to regard the scene in a more serious light. Doubtless the subject of their mirth noticed this change, for he presently disengaged himself from his companion, and, staggering up to the place where they had halted, said in a low, thick whisper—

"Hark ye, brothers: if ye have any love for me, not a word of this at the Priory. Not," he added with a smile, "that there is any harm in such innocent little freedoms as ye have witnessed; but our good Prior hath a most tender spirit, and I would not, for the worth of a silver candlestick, hurt a conscience so delicate as his."

"Thou needst not fear for me," answered Clement coldly. "As thou hast said, thou art older than I, and I pretend not to judge thy actions."

"And for me," said Bernard, "I meddle with no man's pleasure. But thou wouldst do well, Reverend Father," he went on gravely, "to give thy head a dip or two in yonder brook. Our worthy Prior hath a keen eye for these little freedoms, and thou art like to tell thine own tale."

"Thou art in the right there, brother," replied the inebriated monk with a sly glance at his adviser, "and thy youthful counsel shall be followed. Look ye, my children," he continued in a louder voice to the swineherds, "I must leave you now for a matter of my sacred office. Finish yonder flagon amongst you, if ye will; but take heed that ye leave no litter behind you. 'Twere a shame to bring disorder on so fair a spot as this."

These last words of the jovial monk might have been prophetic, for the next moment the little group was startled by a loud scream which at once brought the swineherds to their feet, and caused Bernard to leap as hastily from his mule, and to look around him for the source of their surprise. This was presently made clear by the apparition of a young girl of great grace and beauty, closely pursued by a gallant

whose features, though almost as comely as her own, did not say much for the fair character either of their possessor or his purpose. Such seemed to be the opinion of the girl herself, for she had no sooner entered the glade and seen the party assembled there, than she quickly ran towards them, stretching out her hands, and crying—

"Help, good friends! For the love of Heaven, save me from this villain! I am the daughter of Sir Edmund Dunstan, who will give ye good thanks for your service."

"And I," said the gallant, who seemed to treat lightly both the appeal and the company, "am a knight of the King's house, and I swear to have any man hanged that shall dare to come betwixt me and this damsel!"

The swineherds, who had raised their cudgels on first hearing the call for help, now began to hang back; but Bernard, seizing one of these weapons, advanced boldly before the gallant, so as to stand between him and the pursued maiden.

"Thou art a false knight," he said sternly, "whoever thou mayst be; and if thou speakest truth, the King would do well to have thee served as thou hast promised these poor herds here!—Nay, frown not on me!" he added in a fiercer tone. "Be thy knighthood what it may, thou shalt lay no finger on this lady while I have a hand to hinder thee!"

"A monk militant!" cried the other, with a contemptuous laugh. "By book and beads, methinks a whipping will serve thy turn!—and thou shalt have it, man," he broke off suddenly, enraged at the resolute bearing of the young monk, "if thou movest not more quickly out of my path!"

"Had I but a sword," replied Bernard stoutly, and without yielding his ground, "I would teach thee a lesson in knighthood might help thee to better manners!"

"Thou shalt at least feel the point of one!" rejoined the knight furiously; and, drawing his sword, he aimed a quick thrust at the monk, which would in all likelihood (as a famous master expresses it) have then and there made a finish of our hero and his history, had not that ready youth warded off the blow with his monkish dagger, and, in response, dealt his opponent so lusty a stroke with his cudgel as at once put an end to the conflict.

"What hast thou done?" exclaimed Clement in alarm, leaving his mule and bending over the fallen knight. "I fear, Bernard, thou hast made a sorry ending to this ill day!"

"Done!" answered Bernard. "Only what any man would have done, with arms and a drop of courage in his veins! I tell thee, the knave is but stunned. Do thou and Hubert place him on my mule, and lead him to the nearest hut, where his hurt may be looked to, while I conduct this lady to her father's house; and on thy side," he added to the amazed Hubert, whose wits the adventure had shaken back into sobriety—"for the lady's sake, not a word of this scene at the Priory."

Saying which, Bernard courteously offered his arm to the rescued lady, and they together left the glade; while Clement and his brother monk (for the swineherds had fled the scene at the first hint of bloodshed) hastened obediently to carry out the commands of this singular champion of distressed damsels.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGIC OF THE WOODS

As they walked through the dim pathways of the forest, the lady he had rescued ceased not to fill her deliverer's ears with grateful thanks, until Bernard almost forgot that he was a monk, and began to think he was a knight in good earnest, such as his fancy had so often dreamed of, and his ambition so ardently pictured.

Our record gives no particular account of this lady, any more than of the other characters in the history, save by telling us that she was of uncommon beauty, and of that fair English type which her name implied, and which at this time was still found unmixed in the midst of the other races scattered through the land.

I, myself, conning the few hints of the old Chronicler, and looking across the still waves into that far "once has been," can imagine a fair maiden, slight and not over tall, with soft lint-light hair, and gentle grey eyes, in whose pure sanctuary love, home, and heaven had each a shrine kept for them, and lights ever burning, whether worshippers came or no; and of a spirit not so void of passion as all occupied by affection; perhaps something too pliant, liking rather to follow than to lead, yet firm to go on where her faith was in the steps, even though they led to death—whatever else, wholly a woman, tender, loving, loveable.

Such I can fancy her on that dim September afternoon,

pouring, childlike, the story of her adventure into Bernard's willing ear: telling how she had left her father's house, and strayed into the forest to gather flowers; how she had there been surprised by a great hunting-party which had suddenly crossed her path; how presently the false knight had slipped away from his companions, and followed her through the wood; how he had spoken rudely to her, and had even dared to lay a hand on her; and how she had then screamed out in her terror, and hastily fled from him; and lastly, how she would ever bless and remember Bernard in her prayers, and would offer candles on the altar he served at in thankful acknowledgment of her deliverance.

This last pious mark of her gratitude did not please Bernard quite so much as the rest of the girl's thank-offerings, for it brought him back to Earth, or rather Heaven, with a somewhat painful jerk, and once more reminded him that he was but a monk, with no call to concern himself about the business or passions of common men.

However, if his fair companion's words had for a moment banished his spirit to the cloister-gloom that pressed so darkly on it, the music of her prattle soon brought him back again to the light and joy of her presence, and the sweet haunting of the leafy woodland that kept them company.

There is a kind of magic—unsuspected by zealous witch-finders—in the simple presence of the Woods, more potent than lonely mountain, or dimpled meadow, or even the broad bosom of ocean itself, in moving the hidden springs of Love, and prompting them to burst free from their fountains, and mingle their sweet waters together—in stirring them to play a hundred

mad tricks and follies which they would never have dreamed of letting themselves loose to in any other scene of the governable world.

Something more than the eye sees, or the fancy guesses, must there be in a witchcraft that works such mysterious magic on the creatures that come within its circle. It is like the fairy philtre (only in this case the very atmosphere is all distilment of dewy spells) dropping subtle charms on the sleeping lids, so that the eyes open to find themselves, though they guess it not, bewitched and changed, following new gods, and worshipping at strange shrines, which before they had not dreamed of, or had forgotten. Not young lovers only, fresh to the flowery path, with feet unpricked by thorns, and the heart's drumhead yet unbroken or unlaced; but ancient servitors of Hymen, worthy pensioners of Paphos, veterans disregarded even by Eros, whose arms, if not rusty, have long been hung up high over their heads—these, too, suddenly awake to the memory of a waned moon, and dance again to the old music as lightly as if it had never ceased playing to them.

What is in this spell, then, that is more than silence of mountain, or sweetness of meadow, or freedom of ocean? Is it not that the Woods *sing* to us of love, in their bowers that remind us of Paradise, and so persuade us to be actors in a play that runs for green Time, with no audience save our own beating hearts, no applause but the music of the dancing joy within us?

I know not; but I can fancy that, led on by the kindly Forest, which wove its light spells around their spirits, closer and yet closer as they walked on, Bernard, monk though he were, would

be filled with the thoughts of how fair a maiden he had succoured, and how pleasant it was to be thus discoursing with her, and that for the first time in his dull, deedless life he was *living;* while she would be thinking of his great service to her, and his late bold bearing in her defence, and his present gentle courtesy towards her. At all events, I find that, having reached a certain spot in the forest, and having paused a moment under a great tree, Bernard asked a question of the lady which any man might make bold to put in such a case—to wit, by what name he should address her? To which the lady replied that she was called Rosamond, and that she believed her other name was already known to him. To which Bernard again made answer how pretty a name he thought it, and was about to add a compliment, but of a sudden remembered that he was a monk; and then, after a silence, said—

"It is strange, fair Mistress Rosamond, that we have not met before this day. We must have been neighbours since we were children: I marvel that no chance hath made us acquainted all these years."

"It is not so great a wonder as thou dost fancy," replied the lady, smiling, "seeing that I have but lately returned from abroad, from the convent where I was educated, and therefore am almost a stranger to my native place."

"I trust," said Bernard gallantly, this time throwing the monk to the outer winds, "that thou meanest not again to be a stranger to it. Methinks thy native woods should so miss their one flower, that not all the other blossoms which grow here would be able to make amends for it."

"I knew not," answered Rosamond with a merry laugh, "that you monks ever stooped to pay compliments to vain women; though, in truth," she added more gravely, "I knew not, either, that they fought so gallantly for distressed damsels as thou hast done for me this day."

"He would be a poor knave, whether man or monk, that should not fight for thee," replied Bernard warmly; "and believe me, fair Mistress Rosamond," he continued with kindling eyes, "I would choose to be a man before I were a monk, or my monkhood should fare the worse in it!"

"Thou speakest sadly," said Rosamond, gazing at him with looks full of surprise. "Art thou, then, not happy in thy chosen life?"

"I chose it not," returned the monk bitterly, "any more than thou shouldst be said to choose a husband whom thy father forced thee to wed; and I am happy," he went on in a tone of deep mockery, "as a body might be without its soul, or as a living soul whose body hath been buried in despite of it!"

"I am sorry for thee—in truth, I am sorry for thee," said Rosamond, all the pity in her trembling in her voice. "God pardon me if I speak aught amiss, but methinks it cannot be well for a soul to be chained as thine is—to beat, as thou seemest to do, against the walls of thine own heart's prison-house."

"It is enough," answered Bernard with a joyous flush, "if thou pitiest me. Thy pity would suffice to brighten a darker prison than mine; or even," he added with a sudden touch of gaiety that sprang up in him like a new birth—"ay, even to

set the prisoner free. Yet I speak vainly," he went on after a pause, the gloom once more settling over his features. "I forget that I am a prisoner for *life*, and that the all-present sun is forbidden to shine on *my* face, the music of the common world to sing its melodies in *my* ears, or the joys so dear to every beating pulse to stir *my* heart-strings with their sweet motions—motions which" (and his whole frame shook while he spoke) "it hath pleased men to rob me of, but which the living God gave to me, and which my heart still claimeth, ay, and will ever claim, as its lawful due and free birthright!"

"Do not despair," said Rosamond gently. "God and our Lady may yet find a remedy for thy sorrow. Verily, I am over bold to offer counsel to one like thee," she continued, with a timid glance at her companion; "but I am sorry for thy grief, and would fain say a word, if I might, to be of comfort to it."

"Thou art an angel sent from Heaven!" exclaimed Bernard rapturously, bending his lips over her hand, but with a reverence worthy of a knight-errant—"ay, from Heaven, for thou hast brought me hope, and that I have never known till thou camest thence to show it me!"

"I see thou wast meant to be a knight," said Rosamond with a laugh, blushing a little as she withdrew her hand. "But thou hast not yet told me thy name, or how I am to address thee; though I think I heard thee called Bernard by the monk who was with thee in yonder clearing."

"Call me not by that name," answered Bernard hastily: "it remindeth me overmuch of my prison-house. If thou wilt

indeed be my friend, I would pray thee to call me Cuthbert—Cuthbert Alderic is my true name," he added proudly; "and in thy childhood, ere thou didst go across the seas, thou mayst perchance have heard it mentioned in thy father's house."

"Ay, truly I have heard it often," said Rosamond, "for thy father and mine were many years close friends. We must have been playmates when we were children; yet it is strange that I cannot remember having ever seen thee—but I have offended thee," she broke off suddenly, startled by the dark look of passion which had come over the face of the monk.

"Thou didst but remind me of an old story," replied Bernard in a hoarse voice. "My mother was slandered by a vile knave that would fain have had her smile on him while my father was away in the holy wars; and he, on his return, was fool enough to lend an ear to it—to this lie against an angel whose very thoughts were as the pure breath of Heaven, and whose worst fault—whose only one—was the blind worship that her fond soul had given him!"

"And this lie—what fell of it? What happened to thy mother?" asked Rosamond timidly, a little frightened at the question she had ventured on.

"She died for it—ask me not how," answered Bernard in broken tones; "and I—I was made a present of to yonder Cloister! Now thou knowest my whole history," he went on bitterly, "for in truth that is my whole life—unless," and his fierce look as he spoke once more startled his companion—"unless Heaven grant there be a sequel!"

"It is a sad story," said Rosamond, looking at him with eyes full of tears. "God alone can give it easement. Alack, it is a sad story!"

"But it is not finished—a chapter yet remains!" exclaimed Bernard with a passionate gesture. "The villain still lives who did this wrong, and, by my mother's shame, I have sworn not to die till I have avenged it!"

"Do not speak of vengeance, it cannot help thy mother now—God and our dear Lady will see to it, if thou wilt leave it to their care," said the young girl earnestly. Then, laying her hand gently on his arm, she added—"I like thee not in this fierce humour. I pray thee, let me be thy comfort in this trouble as even now thou wast my defence in yonder glade. I will be thy friend, if thou wilt let me—I will be thy sister, Cuthbert, and thou, like a brother, shalt give me the keeping of all thy sorrow."

Bernard started at her words, as what man will not at the first strange sound of his name uttered by fair lips that breathe their sweetness to him? Then he took the hand that still lay on his arm, and reverently lifted it to his lips, while a new light, like the World's first dawn after Chaos, rose into his eyes, and his answer came—sweet and soft as a birth of music, yet in a voice that had as pious a sound in it as ever was heard at the Prior's matins.

"My sister," he said gently, "with my soul's seal I accept thine offer. I will be a true brother to thee, and God be my judge if I prove false so long as this bond shall be between us!"

After that they walked on again through the silent woodland

paths; the wicked Forest all the while smiling at them, and singing to them, and still weaving around them its strange spells, and ever and anon laughing slyly to itself for joy of its mighty magic—that a monk should make a compact with a maiden.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD BEYOND THE CLOISTER

PRESENTLY Bernard and his fair charge passed from the friendly woods, and entered a large gap or cultivated clearing, wherein stood a plain, moated house, or rather fortress, which Rosamond pointed out to her protector as the home of her father and herself.

The voice of the Forest had left off singing to them, but its music still echoed in their ears, like the remembrance of a dream; and on issuing from its shadows they felt something of the confusion, even in the weird light of this day, of a prisoner suddenly leaving his cell's darkness for the full glare of the noontide sun.

Seemingly, this sense of bewilderment weighed on the spirit of Rosamond, for, after walking awhile in silence, she turned to her companion, and said—

"I pray thee advise me, brother. I scarce know whether to inform my father of this adventure or no. I like not to use concealment; yet I fear, if I should tell him of it, that he will

make search for yonder gallant who followed me, and perchance I may be the cause of more bloodshed."

"And I fear I may meet thee no more," said Bernard sadly, "for thy father will not trust thee again to wander by thyself in these woods. Thou seest how ill I can advise thee sister, since I may not forget myself in my counsel. Yet I think thou hadst best acquaint him with what hath fallen, and leave truth to its own tangle. We shall but add a mesh to it by our fingering."

"I believe thou art right," answered Rosamond. "I have never yet kept back aught from my father, and I would not do so now. Come with me, brother. We will go to him together, and tell him what hath happened to us."

Crossing the drawbridge, and passing thence into the wide hall which lay beyond the Keep or main tower of the little castle, Rosamond led the way to a large, arched chamber overlooking the western side of the moat, and, her summoning knock being answered by a deep voice within, opened the door, and ushered Bernard into the presence of her father.

Here we are once more checked by the meagre account of our record. Many little points in the original manuscript make it plain that this history was written by one who was acquainted with those he describes, and it is probable that for that very reason he is so sparing of details as to their personal appearance and character. Later on, the old Knight is spoken of as being tall, thin, grave-featured, and with long white hair which fell over his shoulders. This, however, is all that is vouchsafed to us, and we have to fill in the outline with the brush and colour-box of our own fancy.

On perceiving his daughter and the monk, the Knight rose quickly from his chair, and advanced towards them with a look of puzzled surprise he was scarce at the pains to conceal.

"Welcome back, daughter," he said, drawing the girl to him, and greeting her with some warmth. "By the mass, I thought thou wast lost in yonder woods, and was about sending Oswald in search of thee. But I knew not thou wert in such good keeping," he added, with a questioning glance at Bernard, "or I might have made a truce with my fears."

"Truly, father," replied Rosamond blushing, and in her turn looking towards the monk, "but for this gentleman thou mightest have had some cause for them. I pray thee, take no heed of the accident; but as I was walking in yonder woods a strange gallant followed me, and would have spoken rudely to me, had not this gentleman come between us, and after that brought me hither in safety."

"Fie, daughter!" returned the old Knight with a smile, and without showing much agitation at the girl's news. "Thou forgettest thy respect to call a holy Frere by the common titles of carnal men; though, indeed, the service he hath rendered thee is somewhat strange to one of his Order. But I thank him none the less—nay, I should do so the more," he continued, turning to the monk and holding out his hand, "and if the Reverend Father will accept the hand of an unworthy son of the world, I would fain assure him of my gratitude."

"I trust," said Bernard, taking the proffered hand and bowing courteously to the Knight, "that Sir Edmund Dunstan doth not deem it unbecoming in any man, be he a monk or no, to protect a lady from the insults of a rude villain."

"Assuredly not, assuredly not, Reverend Father," answered the Knight, "and thou must forgive me for deeming thy service a strange one. I owe thee a thousand thanks, and shall not fail to offer gifts for thy dispensing—so far as my poor means allow," he added with a sigh, "for they have lost something of their substance since the time when my grandsire lived here."

"Our poor are well cared for," replied Bernard coldly, "and I desire no thanks for what I have done. To have rendered thy daughter a service is sufficient reward—even to a monk," he broke off bitterly, his old spirit rising up again despite the gentle presence of his adopted sister.

"Ha! methinks the knight spake there," said Sir Edmund smiling. "Truly, Reverend Father, I begin to think thou hidest a Templar's cross beneath that grey cloak of thine. Thou savourest not much of St. Benedict, if thou wilt forgive an old soldier for saying so."

"Be not offended with my father for speaking thus to thee," whispered Rosamond to the monk, "he knoweth not who thou art." Then, addressing her father, she said—"I should have told thee before that my protector here is the son of our old neighbour and thy former friend, Sir Wilfrid Alderic. Methinks that name will give him a welcome to our poor house."

"Ay, that will it! Why didst thou not say so at the first?" cried the old Knight in a heartier tone, and again offering his hand to Bernard. "To speak truth, young man, I love not thine Order over greatly, and, if my old eyes read aright, thou lovest it not much better; but I loved thy

father: we were comrades as well as friends, and any son of his hath a claim on old Edmund Dunstan's heart and home. By the mass, I no longer marvel that thou didst lift thy hand in my daughter's defence! But 'twas a foul wrong to put thee into that monk's gown," he added, with an admiring glance at the stalwart figure of his guest. "Faith, thou art a good soldier spoiled, and the first of thy race that ever trod cloister in sandals—nay, I know thy story," he went on quickly, seeing the changed look in Bernard's face, "and the Lord wots I am sorry for thee, though thou must needs make the best of the choice now, for the Devil himself cannot alter it for thee."

"'Tis like that the Devil made the choice, for I did not!" replied Bernard, half in bitterness, and half moved out of his common self by the old Knight's novel sympathy.

"I know that, my lad," said Sir Edmund warmly, apparently forgetting, like most who held converse with the young Benedictine, the sacred character of his visitor—"I know that. The Devil, I believe, had the whole making of this business; and, by our Lady, he made it sad enough to please even his dainty palate.—But tell me," he continued in a lower voice, "doth any other beside ourselves here, and thy Prior, know thee to be a son of Wilfrid Alderic?"

"None that I wot of," answered Bernard, with a look of surprise at the question, "saving a young monk who, so far as may be, is my chosen friend and companion. I doubt there is none other that knoweth my secret; except, indeed, my father's old servitor and man-at-arms, and he would as lief fly an arrow at the King's Grace as speak a word that should bring me any mischief."

"I know him, and he is as true as thou sayest," returned the old Knight. "Ay, and I have seen him in the fight, too; and I tell thee he can play with a sword, though 'tis not his proper weapon, as well as the best gallant in England. But I advise thee as thy father's friend, be not over ready to tell the world that thy name is Cuthbert Alderic."

"Thou knowest my name Cuthbert," said the monk, with a quick glance at his adviser.—"Dost thou know, too, my mother's history?"

"Thou hast forestalled the very question I was about to ask of thee," replied Sir Edmund. "I knew not if thou hadst heard of that matter, and I am sorry to find it is so."

"Ay, I have known it," said Bernard, with so fierce a look that even the old Knight started back a pace—"known it since they tore me from my mother's bleeding breast, after they had blasted her fair fame with the lie that villain forged for her! It was well they killed her," he added mournfully, "for she could not have borne to live with that foul doubt upon her soul. Then the cowards made a monk of me," he went on, with a voice that thrilled through with passion, "that so they might escape her son's vengeance! But they were mistaken—by the living God of justice, they were mistaken; for that son standeth here to-day, as ready—ay, and as able—to do battle with them as the proudest knight of them all!"

The old Knight seemed strangely moved by this outburst of passion, and for some moments stood silently gazing at the monk, almost as though he were in fear of him. In a while, laying his hand on Bernard's arm, he said earnestly—

"Thou forgettest one thing, my young friend, when thou

speakest in the plural of thy mother's slanderers. As thou doubtless knowest, thy father paid a dear penalty for his rashness, and lived and died in the sorrow of it; and for any of his acquaintance who may have been foolish enough to lend an ear to the scandal, they had naught to do with its encompassing. There is but one man who liveth and could answer thee, and I again advise thee, as thy father's friend, to remind him not of thine existence, for he is one that the boldest care not to make an enemy of; and thou must needs remember, though it suiteth ill with thy stomach, that thou belongest to a peaceful calling."

"I am not like to forget it," returned Bernard in a gloomy tone. "I am a monk, and so must bear meekly what the meanest slave would leap to answer with his bond-chains—what thou, Sir Edmund, old as thou art, wouldst not suffer for thy fair daughter here, not if thou hadst twenty such knaves as thou speakest of to stand up and flout thee!"

"Thou art a brave youth," replied the Knight heartily, "and, if thou wert any other than thou art, I would help thee with my old sword as well as with my counsel. But thou remindest me of my daughter's adventure," he added, "of which, to say truth, I cared not overmuch to talk when I knew thee but as a monk and a stranger. Nevertheless, I have greatly marvelled what loose fellow hath dared thus openly to insult the daughter of a gentleman. By the mass, these French manners have spoiled the country for us! In King Edwin's time, God rest him! a maiden might walk where she had a mind to, and no light knave dare have meddled with her, were he clown or noble; but the fashion hath changed since then,

and our women can no longer leave our doors without a guard to keep watch upon their heels."

"Thou must question the King," said Bernard with a meaning smile, "for this gallant I knocked on the head gave us warning that he belonged to his Grace's household. But methinks thou and Mistress Rosamond art avenged enough. I only hope that I did not kill him, for I fear I hit him over hard on that knave's pate of his."

"I doubt it not," answered the Knight laughing, "and I am glad it was no pate of mine. But I fear," he went on gravely, "that thou hast risked more for us than I had imagined. If the King come to hear of it, he may make complaint of this matter to the Prior."

"I care not if he doth," said the monk stoutly, "though I fancy there is small fear of it. The gallant I encountered will not be very eager to boast of his knightly exploit; and if he should, King Henry loves a fair deed in any man, and like enough would be the first to point a laugh at him."

"Maybe thou art right," said Sir Edmund thoughtfully; "and if thou art not, thou canst count on one friend to stand up for thee to the King—ay, and to the Prior as well, for he oweth me a fair turn for former kindness. But thou must be fasting," he broke off suddenly, "after that bout of thine in yonder forest. Sit down with us at the board, man, and make a sound meal for once, ere thou returnest to thy pulse and watered Gascoigny."

Bernard was about to make reply, when a servant entered the room, and in a low voice delivered some message to Sir Edmund which the monk could not hear.

"Sir Eustace Devereux!" exclaimed the Knight in surprise. "By the mass, his visit hath fallen strangely! Dost thou know who this man is?" he added in a whisper to Bernard. Then, seeing the monk's answer in his eyes, he went on quickly—"And knowing it, dost thou wish to remain here? Or shall I let thee out by the southern passage, so thou mayest depart unperceived? Certes, this meeting were best avoided."

"If it hinder not thy conference, I would choose to stay here," replied Bernard. "I have a great desire to see this gentleman."

"So it seemeth," said Sir Edmund shortly. "Well, if thou must, thou must; but I warn thee 'tis a fool's choice.—Go, Oswald," he continued in a louder voice to the servant, "and beg Sir Eustace to step hither. But, by the Lord, man," he resumed to Bernard, when the door had again closed on them, "see thou puttest a muzzle on that monk's patience of thine, for I wish not to have a quarrel in my house. To speak truth, I love not yonder knight much better than dost thou, but he standeth well with some that are in power, and thou must not look daggers at me if I say a fair word before his face."

"I would thou mightest be persuaded," said Rosamond, in her turn appealing to the monk. "Thou hast yet time to avoid this meeting if thou wilt, and I wot that no good is like to fall of it."

"Have no fears," answered Bernard, smiling at his advisers. "As regards this Sir Eustace Devereux, I am well assured he hath not seen me since I was a child; and for myself, I

will promise fair Mistress Rosamond to avoid the very thoughts of a quarrel."

Further argument was here put an end to by the entry of the subject of their discussion—Sir Eustace Devereux himself. This doughty knight, judging by all accounts of him, must have been well worthy of a place in that brigade of brawny champions who have figured so bravely in romance or history from Corineus to Captain Johnson the Smuggler. Even our lame record makes shift to some description of him; from which, a little helped out by my own fancy, I picture him to have been a man still in his full vigour, a trifle above the middle height, of great bulk and bodily force, but active enough; and having a face chiefly expressive of boldness and resolution, yet not uncomely after the heroic kind, and with just a hint of something better, or at least pleasanter, when the ground was not occupied by those fiercer passions which more often had possession of it. These same passions, I conclude from the evidence already quoted, must have largely swallowed up his humanity, for although, like other men, he could show good fellowship at a feast or over a flagon, there was scarce any one that had a regard for him, unless, indeed, it were the King, who valued him as an excellent soldier. This much may be gathered from the old memorials—that his equals, mostly, feared or were jealous of him, and that his vassals and inferiors cursed him when they dared, either for his tyranny or his selfish neglect of them; while women, though they might admire his brave looks and gallant deeds, could hardly love him, at any rate unreservedly, since his vows could never be trusted—except to be broken.

Such—a type not uncommon to the time—was the man who now entered the room, and put an end to the discussion between the monk and his two counsellors. The bulky visitor was seemingly in a fit of high good humour, for he strode up to the old Knight, and with a familiar slap on the shoulder, accompanied by a hearty laugh, called out lustily—

"How dost thou, worthy Sir Edmund, and thy fair daughter Mistress Rosamond, too? By the mass, 'tis long since I have set eyes on you! But I warrant time hath not made thee less sound, nor the lady less winsome—faith, no, not a jot, not a jot—that might hardly be, methinks——how sayst thou, Reverend Father?" he added, suddenly becoming aware of Bernard's presence. "Verily, you monks are esteemed good judges of the ladies."

"If we are, we do not speak much of them," replied Bernard quietly, and without appearing to notice the mocking tone of his questioner.

"Ha! is that so? Ye better like to *act*, eh?" said Sir Eustace with a loud laugh. "Faith, I have always heard that you were sly fellows with the women, if Mistress Rosamond will forgive me for saying it."

"Truly, Sir Eustace," interposed the old Knight quickly, "I know not how it may be with us, but I canbear witness to that hand of thine having lost nothing of its former heartiness. If it presseth so hard over a greeting, I marvel how 'twould serve in a death-grip!"

"It would not tickle," returned Sir Eustace with a grim smile. "And that same jest of thine, good Sir Edmund, putteth me in mind of my present visit, which is to hold

counsel with thee on the forthcoming jousts here, that are to be honoured—so 'tis said—by the presence of the King's own Grace."

"It is true," answered Sir Edmund, "his Grace hath signified his pleasure to be present at our tilting here, and at the same time to enjoy a few days' chase in the forest. I am about to have the lists made ready in yonder clearing, for I think 'tis as good ground as may be fixed on."

"There is none better," said Sir Eustace with an approving nod. "Faith, if the jousters be half as good, we shall show his Grace some play worth his looking on—thinkest thou not so, Reverend Father?" he again added to Bernard, and in the same mocking tone as before. "But, certes, I forget that you gentry of the Cloister are not such good judges of a fight as ye are of a lady's favours."

"Truly, my son," replied Bernard, in as mocking a voice as that of his questioner, "thou judgest us aright. What should a poor monk know of gallant deeds and knightly arms? But if I did deal in such carnal matters, methinks I should desire better sport than running at my foe with a pointed stick, and, if I chanced to leave my horse first, being dragged off by the heels like a dead buck out of a clearing."

"And what, in God's name, wouldst thou choose, then?" asked the Knight, his bantering tone giving way to one of surprise at the strange speech of the monk.

"I am but a poor monk," again answered Bernard gravely, "and know nought of these things; but methinks, if I were a knight such as thou art—verily, two swords and a plot of free turf would be the game I should choose to play at."

"By our Lady, thou art not so far in the wrong," said Sir Eustace with another loud laugh, "and I have often said as much to my good friend Sir Edmund here; but, though he is chosen Marshal of the lists, and might strain a point in the ruling, he will not listen to me in this matter, and we must e'en be content with 'sticks,' as thou pleasest to call them.—St. George, Reverend Father, since thou art so enamoured of fair fighting, thou mightest use thy ghostly influence with the good Knight to make that same change in our programme."

Here Rosamond, who had moved between the door and Sir Eustace, gave a warning look at the monk, as if to remind him of his promise, and then, unobserved by the former, quietly left the room.

"These matters," said Sir Edmund, when the door had closed on his daughter, "are for the King to decide, and must be left to his Grace's good pleasure. Thou canst make application to his Grace, if thou hast a mind, worthy Sir Eustace; but even were it to fall so, I doubt if thou wouldst find any bold enough to accept thy challenge, for thou art accounted too rough a master in the play for pupils to desire a lesson from thee."

"I marvel at that," said Bernard. "I should not have thought all the gallant knights that bravely boast in ladies' bowers would have been so fearful of a little extra beef and blade. For my part, if I were a knight instead of the poor monk I am, I would gladly take a lesson at the hands of so worthy a master."

"Faith, and I would as gladly give thee one," said Sir Eustace with warmth, either not noticing the first half of the

monk's speech, or being mollified by the latter part of it—"ay, and will, too, if good Sir Edmund seeth no hindrance to it; for, the Lord knows, 'tis a miracle not to be waited for to find a monk with a man's mettle in him."

"But I do see a hindrance to it," answered the old Knight hastily. "'Tis not fitting in a monk to play at warfare, nor would I have him so schooled in this house of mine. Be content: thou wilt shortly have work enough in schooling those of thine own mettle."

"Nay, man—nay, good Sir Edmund," replied Sir Eustace eagerly, "spoil not a pretty game at its beginning. Dost think I would prick the worthy Father in right earnest? By the Rood, I will but teach him a pass or two, and promise to be as tender of his skin as 'twere a maiden's."

"And I also pray thee," said Bernard in a low whisper to Sir Edmund, "let me cross swords a moment with him. I swear to thee," he added earnestly, "that I would but try his measure, and that I would not make a quarrel with him *now*—not if my mother's spirit were to rise up and point to him."

Thus appealed to on both sides, the old Knight seemingly came to a sudden change in his resolution. Knowing the young monk's history, and having a suspicion of his feelings, he possibly thought that the proposed "lesson" might after all be the best medicine for cooling Bernard's ardour, and he had not much doubt of the lusty Knight's ability to play the schoolmaster. At any rate, he now unlocked a door in one of the panels of the wainscot, and drew from thence a pair of old swords, fashioned blunt and edgeless for the purpose, and presented one of them to each of his warlike visitors.

"If ye like to make use of these," he said, "ye are welcome; but I will have no rough playing in my house, and even with such rude tools as they are I entreat you to be gentle in your practice."

"Have no dread," said Sir Eustace, laughing, "we will play like young steers in a paddock; and, by my faith, 'twould be hard to cut the throat of one with such knives as thou hast put into our hands.—But to our guard, now! I pray thee, canst thou fence at all, Reverend Father?"

"A very little," replied Bernard modestly. "Before I took vows my father's servant taught me a few passes, but I am grown almost as rusty as this old blade."

"Thou dost at least know thy standing," said Sir Eustace, as the monk put himself in position before his opponent. "Certes, thou standest firm and straight for one of thy Order," he added with an approving nod. "But say, man: how shall we begin our practice? Dost feel thyself apt enough to ward, if I should play a little at thrust or stroke with thee?"

"If it please thee, methinks that were best," answered Bernard. "Strike at me as thou likest, and I will ward thee as well as my skill knoweth; and presently, if I be able, I will thrust at thee in my turn—that is, if thou wilt give me so much freedom."

"Thou shalt be welcome," cried Sir Eustace with a laugh. "If thou touchest my doublet, I will give thee a pair of candles for thine altar!"

"I want them not," said Bernard coldly. "If I chance so to reach thee, it will be reward enough to have touched a knight so famous as thou art."

Sir Eustace and his pupil now removed their cloaks, and without more ado began the "lesson" which the knight had promised to the monk. In those days, and long after them, the art of fencing was a much simpler affair than it became later on, when the courtly rapier and polished foils succeeded the heavy war-swords of our ancestors. Then, probably, special skill or culture counted for less than bodily force or activity. Nevertheless, there was at all times sufficient scope for science to sport itself, for the wit of weapons to point their prowess; and Bernard showed enough of this to move the wonder alike of his instructor and of the old Knight who was anxiously watching him. At first, in deference to his host's wish, and expecting nothing more from the encounter than a novel source of mirth, Sir Eustace contented himself with slow passes or laboured feints, thinking at every stroke or lunge to have a laugh at the scared face of the monk—either starting back from him in affright, or looking down glumly at the sword knocked about his feet. Presently, however, finding that Bernard met all his play with apparent ease, and that he had not yielded a foot of his own ground, and noting, also, the cool, almost mocking, expression of his opponent's face, the burly Knight began to press home more warmly, and so far forgot the schoolmaster in the rival as to treat the monk in sharp succession to every trick of cut and thrust his art was in the secret of. The result was, notwithstanding, no wit nearer its mark; for Bernard, though this hurricane of blows and passes fairly taxed the quickness alike of his eye and of his limbs, never appeared to be seriously troubled in parrying the Knight's assaults; and the

latter, after again and again trying every point of his enemy's armour, seemed in the end to have accomplished nothing but that somewhat rare spectacle—a teacher grown tired before his pupil.

"Body of mine," he exclaimed, after a final thrust at the monk which that novice failed not to parry—"thou hast not forgotten how to ward! But breathe thyself a space, man. Thou hast played long enough for a first bout. It is not well to overtire thyself in practice."

"I thank thy courtesy, but I am scarce yet warmed," answered Bernard in a quiet voice. Then he added quickly—"Look to thine own guard, Sir Knight, for I have a mind to return thy favours!" and making a few rapid passes, which seemed to cause his antagonist some confusion, he suddenly dealt a blow of such strength and twist that the Knight's sword was forced from his grasp, and his hand wrenched painfully by the movement.

For a moment it seemed likely that a more serious feud would take the place of this hitherto friendly bout, for Sir Eustace with a fierce oath half drew his own sword, and his face looked black with threatenings; but presently, recollecting himself and the absurdity of the situation, he got the better of his rage, and with as pleasant an air as he could muster said to Bernard—

"By the mass, Sir Monk—though I know not whether thou be a monk truly, or the Devil—thou art fitter to be my fence-master than I thine!"

"Nay, Sir Knight," replied Bernard modestly, "it is but an accident. Thou wast over-gentle with mine ignorance,

and I took thee at a disadvantage. I doubt I should not venture with thee were the bout an earnest one; but any clown might trip a master with such clumsy tools as these."

"Thou sayest truly there," said Sir Eustace. "These old toasting-irons of Sir Edmund are not the sort of stuff a knight loves to handle; but none the less thou art a marvel of monkhood—ay, man," he added, recovering his humour a little as he slapped Bernard familiarly on the shoulder, "and the very pattern I would choose for mine own confessor, if I could afford the luxury of keeping one."

"Hast thou so many sins, then," said Bernard, with a keen glance at his late antagonist, "that thou needest a private confessor to hear them?"

"Few or many," answered the Knight, laughing, "thou shouldst hear them every one; and to save time—how thinkest thou?—we would say them over practice in my fencing-room."

"Truly, a good plan," rejoined the monk gravely, "and one which might embrace penance. Methinks, Sir Knight, I would first begin with thy *past*, for if that account were settled, I doubt not the rest might be left to Heaven."

"How now? What meanest thou by that speech, Master Frere?" exclaimed Sir Eustace in an angry tone. "Faith, thou art somewhat sharp both with sword and tongue for one of thy calling; but I advise thee to put a civil guard on thy mouth, or I may have to show thee a thrust thou wilt find more trouble in warding."

Here the old Knight, who had for some time been an

anxious listener to the debate, came forward, and interposed between the disputants.

"Be not offended," he said to Sir Eustace. "The worthy Brother means no affront to thee. He hath but heard, what all the world talketh of, the fame of thy former conquests in the lists of love. 'Tis common matter that Sir Eustace Devereux hath broken more hearts even than he hath cracked heads, and the sly rogue hints that thy confessor would have work enough to put it right for thee."

This compliment—as men would mostly take it—seemed to have the effect of appeasing the Knight's wrath, for he laughed loudly, and with great good humour replied—

"What! dost thou slander me, too, worthy Sir Edmund? Nay now, cry thee mercy, man, not so many as thou and the monk would saddle me with. Nevertheless, there are a few trippings to be confessed; and one or two," he added in a more serious tone, "that I would fain do penance for, if this good Frere (for truly I should prefer him to any other) might make shift to give me absolution."

"I must hear them first, Sir Knight," returned Bernard coldly, "so that I may judge the measure of the penance."

"Perchance thou shalt one day—but I know not," said Sir Eustace moodily. Then, taking the old Knight aside, he whispered—"Who is this monk? I remember not to have seen him before, and he is not one to be forgotten."

"He is a stranger here," answered Sir Edmund unblushingly. "He dwelleth near the Welsh border, and that is why he is so practised in fencing."

"Faith, I am glad of it," said Sir Eustace with a shrug.

"I have no mind to have it told that a monk hath beaten me at fence."

"I think thou needest fear that but little," replied Sir Edmund. "A monk is not like to boast of his fencing, unless he hath a wish to do penance for it."

Sir Eustace here took leave of the old Knight, first promising to pay another visit soon, to discuss the details of the coming jousts. This greeting over, he approached Bernard, whom he seemed disposed to regard with unwonted favour despite the monk's strange manner to him, and said—

"Mass, man! thou hast spoiled my present practice for the King's sports; but I bear thee no malice for it, and I trust thou wilt remain here long enough to give me a lesson in thy turn."

"It shall not be my fault if I do not," answered Bernard eagerly. "Thou shalt find me as ready for another lesson, and we will look for better weapons to practise with."

For an instant Sir Eustace sharply regarded his late pupil, as if in some doubt as to his meaning; and then, after again saluting his host and the monk, the former of whom accompanied him to the outer door, he took his departure.

When the old Knight returned to the room he looked at first rather gravely at Bernard, but presently broke into a hearty fit of laughter.

"Thou art a pretty fellow to be a monk!" he said, when at length he had got the reins of his merriment. "Thou, a sworn professor of peace, to put to shame, and almost pick a quarrel with, the most dreaded champion of our French chivalry! Truly, a pleasant tale to tickle the ears of thy

worthy Prior with! Not that thou needest fear his ever hearing of it," he went on, again bursting out laughing, "unless thou tellest him thyself, for I will be bond that yonder doughty knight will keep the secret. He would as lief pay a hundred wax candles as have it told that a monk had tripped his sword from him."

"Wilt thou help me in this matter?" said Bernard earnestly; and then added—"Thou knowest what I would ask of thee, and if thou wilt thou hast the power, as yonder knight hath just told thee. Thou wast my father's friend —ay, and my mother's too—I think thou didst even say so; and thou mightest surely help me to free her memory from this foul stain—yea, though I were a monk thrice-sworn, for, Heaven judge it! a son should stand first in this reckoning."

"But thou art a monk," replied the old Knight uneasily, "and thou reckonest not the peril of this adventure thou proposest. I would strain a tough knot to do thee a kindness, but this matter concerneth more than our two selves, and I cannot lightly fly my shaft in the faces of King and Church. Nevertheless," he continued, laying his hand kindly on the monk's shoulder, "thou needest not look so black over it. 'Tis a thing to be thought upon, and I will shortly see thee again, and give thee a more certain answer. For the present, saving my courtesy as host, methinks it is time for thee to be gone, or the worthy Prior will be asking thee the reason."

The darkness was fast falling, and, *sans* compliment, it was high time for Bernard to depart. Taking, therefore, his host's hint, he bade adieu to the old Knight, and, without waiting for the latter to accompany him, hurried quickly to

the outer door, and was soon standing on the drawbridge which spanned the moat of the little castle. Here, however, he was destined to meet a further delay (for which he would gladly have done penance both to Time and the Prior) in the presence of the fair being whom the Forest magic had that day transformed into his sister. For a moment, not recognising her in the fading light, and his mind being full of other causes of excitement, Bernard started back in awe, almost thinking that he beheld a spirit; but Rosamond, coming nearer, quickly reassured him by the warm touch of her hand, and by saying to him—

"Thou hast stayed a long while with my father, brother. I heard the sound of weapons, and I was fearful——"

"That I had forgotten my promise?—By our gentle Lady, no! Who would be false to vows sworn at so fair a shrine?" returned Bernard in a gallant tone. Then he said more seriously—"I have not broken my promise to thee, my sweet sister, and there hath been no quarrel betwixt me and yonder knight: he but proffered me a lesson in fencing, and, as he is so famous a master, the occasion was over-tempting to a poor unpractised monk."

"Thou shouldst not have consented—but hath he hurt thee, brother? I wot well he is a very dangerous man," said Rosamond, glancing timidly at the monk as though to see if he bore any traces of misadventure.

"Thou must ask him that question," answered Bernard, laughing, "for he hath taken with him all the hurt that fell between us; but in truth it was nothing, and we parted better than we met—or are like to meet again," he added in a

sterner voice. Then, fearing lest these last words might attract the girl's notice, he went on quickly—"But I pray thee let us forget this man awhile, and think on kinder things; and truly, my sweet sister, ere I leave thee, I would fain know if I shall see thee any more—if thou wilt have the freedom to talk again with me in yonder forest. Thou hast made this one day so sunny with thy presence that I dread the thoughts of walking the world without thee, for methinks I am like to stumble at every turn in the darkness if I have not thy light to guide my steps."

"I would gladly be of help to thee," replied Rosamond gently, "for thou hast risked thy life to help me; and I know thou art not happy, and that thou hast no friend to give thee comfort. I am often in the forest," she added, "and my father will be glad to see thee here. I doubt not we shall meet soon again."

Then Bernard did a most unmonkish thing, for which the Prior, or maybe the Pope himself, might have found it hard to give him absolution—he knelt at Rosamond's feet, and kissed her hand like a very knight of chivalry; after which he went his way again through the silent forest tracks, and was soon lost in the darkness, whose chaste folds gathered round him like a curtain, and hid him from the World's eye, as indeed was most meet to be done with so apostate a son of the Church.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORLD WITHIN THE CLOISTER

NIGHT had fallen when Bernard at last reached the gates of the Priory, and left freedom and the broad forest behind him. As Sir Edmund Dunstan had predicted, the truant monk was at once summoned into the presence of his Superior, and questioned as to his long absence.

The Prior, from the hints our record gives us, was not one to be greatly held in dread even by a weightier conscience than that which oppressed Bernard; and the latter, despite his growing rebellion against the life chosen for him, really loved the old man, who had at all times treated him like a son in fact as well as name, and whose venerable face seldom showed sternness save where some more than common fault called for rebuke, or some crying sin had to be punished. Towards Bernard he had always turned in tenderness; partly out of pity for his follower's sad story, of which he himself held the secret; and partly, that he had long watched with an anxious eye the marshalled forces that were met to do battle in him, and which he felt that his hand had helped to harness. The old man, moreover, a little kindled to the young monk's dawning passions, because the fire that had burned his own heart fifty years before, and which he had brought hither to be extinguished, still kept its flame alive in him, and cast a glow on the world without, alike serving to preserve his youth from rusting, and helping him to read by

its light the hearts of others. Nevertheless, the worthy Prior was first of all a faithful servant of the Church; and if the flame of his affections glowed yet clear in him, the fire on his altar burned still brighter, and he would not have stayed his hand from quenching the one if the light of the other had been in question. Religion, and zeal for the accepted canons of God and Church, were to him the one sun around which all else moved; and for any man to slip out of this orbit, though his heart might pity the occasion, his soul, to win the wandering star to its place again, would have deemed no expedient unlawful; or, if fallen beyond recall, would have thought no judgment too severe that might condemn it to a yet remoter exile. In the little things of life, even those that concerned his Order, he was both prudent and indulgent, and the rules of Benedict, which that wise founder had adapted, so far as in such case might be, to the varying needs of human nature, lost nothing in his hands. Only in great issues, moral or religious, was he inexorable; and then he was like blind Justice with the scales, or deaf Duty with a double-edged sword, and his own brother might have prayed him not to strike as vainly as the worst Jew that ever scoffed at Holy Rood or Sacred Wafer. On the whole, our record pictures him to have been a very kindly, somewhat strict old man, esteemed (as some biographies, and most tombstones, say) by all, certainly loved by the poor, and liked well enough by his own monks—or, at any rate, by such of them as were content to abide quietly beneath the laws they had subscribed to; among which, we fear, our hero, Bernard, could not with certainty be reckoned.

When the latter entered the Prior's room, the old man looked earnestly at him for a moment, and then said—

"Thou art late, my son. The journey that I sent thee upon needed not so long an absence, and thy companion, Clement, hath returned without thee. Why is this, my son? And what hath caused this delay in thine appearance?"

"I was detained in the forest by an accident," replied Bernard, "and I desired Clement to return here without me."

"An accident, my son?" said the Prior, with a keen glance at the monk's face. "And what, my son, hadst thou to do with this accident?"

Bernard reflected a moment, equally at a loss how to keep the secret of his new sister's adventure and to avoid being false to himself. The Prior, however, put an end to his doubt by adding with a grave smile—

"Doth it concern thee so greatly then, my son, that a young man should make love to a maiden?"

"By the Rood, yes, my Father!" answered Bernard warmly. "When a maiden asketh help against a villain, it concerns me to remember that I am a man! I cannot forget that, Father, though thou shouldst condemn me to do penance all my days."

"I condemn thee to no penance," said the old man sadly, "nor do I wholly blame thee for what thou hast done. I would have thee help the weak and oppressed—nay, I doubt not I should myself have aided this maiden; but not with blows, my son—not, had I been as young as thou art, with such a blow as thou didst deal him. Dost thou know who this gallant is whom thou smotest?"

"No," replied Bernard, "I know him not. I but knew him to be a villain, and so treated him. I am only sorry, my Father, that my doing so hath displeased thee."

"I am not so displeased with thee as sorry for thee," said the Prior in a gentle voice; "and more than this, my son, I am sore troubled for thy future weal. I fear thou art over ready to join in strife, and warmest thyself too eagerly towards the things of the carnal world. Thou indeed rememberest that thou art a man; but I fear me thou as often forgettest thou art a soldier of the Church, and that the foes thou hast to fight with are not those of flesh and blood, but the enemies of thine own soul and Heaven."

"I forget not that I am a monk," answered Bernard bitterly, and speaking with a boldness he had never before ventured on, "nor, since I have known my own thoughts, have I ever hidden from thee that I loved not the life chosen for me."

"Truly, I have known it," returned the old Prior in the same sorrowful tone, "though thou hast hitherto spared me the grief of hearing thee so plainly say it. But to what end makest thou this complaint, my son? Thou canst not lightly put off what God hath laid upon thee; and believe me, thou doest not wisely to treat it as a burden—nay, my son, thou shouldst rather welcome it as a blessing, the more gracious since thou sayest thou didst not choose it, the more needful as thy carnal thoughts are lifted in enmity against it. Moreover, my son, though I desire not to urge that on thee at the present time, the thing thou lustest after is beyond thy reaching to. Thou canst not now change the course thy feet are set to walk

in, and thou wilt but spend thyself on empty shadows—ay, my son, and it may even be worse—if thou lettest thy soul wander in vain thoughts of it."

"I know it, Father," replied Bernard gloomily, "but it is in vain for thee to bid me change my nature. Thou canst not hide my heart under this monk's frock, any more than thou couldst teach a wren to hawk by putting a falcon's hood over its eyes ere thou fliedst it."

"My son, my son, what hath happened to thee?" exclaimed the Prior, with a searching look at the young Benedictine. "I have long known that thou wert dissatisfied with thy present life, but never have I heard thee speak like this. Tell me plainly, my son: hath aught befallen thee this day to put thy heart still further from its duty? Be true with me, Bernard," he added in a kinder tone. "Thou knowest that I have ever loved thee as a son, and thou mayest trust me as thou wouldst thine own father."

"There is nothing—I have nothing to tell thee," answered Bernard in a low voice. "My dislike to this path chosen for me is an old story, though I have not before ventured to speak so plainly of it. But, as thou sayest, Father, it is vain to think of it now: it cannot now be altered; and I must even bear with it to the end as I best may."

"But it is not vain, my son, to win fruit from this stray sapling—if thou wilt e'en have it so—of thy young life," said the Prior earnestly. "Thou thinkest overmuch, at thy present season, of this garden thou deemest so desirable; but the sunshine is soon clouded by the storm, the blossoms are quickly withered or dashed, and the heart is spoiled of its

treasure almost before the eyes have done looking on it. Passion, my son, hath a short reign, and a troubled one, and its crown is not worth the weight in wearing. It is, moreover, a rebel, and one ever at strife with itself, that hath no peace in its possession. If thou wouldst bear good fruit, thou must choose another garden; and if thou wouldst reign happily, thou must seek another sovereignty. Truly, I can but point out the path to thee, my son, and I pray God to lead thee better than I have done!"

"Nay, my Father," said Bernard, moved and softened by the old man's evident trouble on his behalf, "thou hast led me as none other could—gently, and kindly, ay, and wisely, as ever shepherd led his sheep, and it is not thy fault if my feet are prone to wander. Believe me, Father, I doubt not the end thou wouldst point me to; but methinks there are more paths than one by which a soul may reach its mark, and I like not this that hath been chosen for me."

"But it is one, my son, which having entered thou canst not wander from without peril," answered the Prior in a solemn voice. "It is the narrow path our Blessed Lord hath Himself pointed out to us, and woe indeed to the feet which turn aside from it! Thou, my son, even now, art looking back to thy plough and thy yoke of oxen. Better were it for thee to burn thy plough and slay thine oxen, and turn thy thoughts to God Who calleth thee."

"I see not how I can look back to the plough I have never handled, to the oxen I have never harnessed," rejoined Bernard stolidly; "nor how I am to judge the broad world from this one path my feet are standing on. Our Blessed

Lord gave us a choice and freedom. There are but few, Father, that tread our path. Are all in peril, then, that choose not to walk in it?"

"They that walk not our road are not judged like those which do," returned the Prior, speaking in a more severe tone than he had yet allowed himself. "He that hath once seen the light and followed it, and after that turneth away his eyes from it, is in greater darkness than he which was blind always."

"And for him that was perforce put into this road before his eyes were open and could see the light thou speakest of—I pray thee, Father, what shall be his case?" said Bernard dauntlessly, forgetting in his zeal for his own grievance that it is almost as hazardous to beard a good man over his beliefs as to face a wild beast that has whelps with it.

"Thou settest thyself against God!" exclaimed the Prior with kindling eyes, all the gentleness in them making room for the priestly wrath that was fast filling the old man's heart and driving from it the affection he had so long kept there for his young neophyte. "Verily, I fear the devil hath got hold of thee, and that thou art minded to give him welcome. But take heed, my son, while warning may yet be offered thee. Hitherto I have loved thee as a father: let me not have to condemn thee as a judge."

"Thou knowest that I fear no punishment thou couldst judge me," said Bernard, flushing haughtily as he spoke. Then he added with sudden feeling—"Yet I am truly sorry if I have offended thee, my Father, and I pray thee to give me pardon for it. Believe me, I am not ungrateful for all thy

care of me, but I am sore troubled in heart—ay, and in soul also; and I would say so to none but thee, my Father, not if my soul cracked in twain with its burden!"

Saying which, the young Benedictine bent his proud knee to the Prior, and the old man, all his kindness won back into his eyes again, mildly answered him—

"Thou must ask pardon of Heaven, my dear son, for it is against Heaven thou hast offended. If only I can lead thy feet from these bands of the Evil One, I shall forgive thee with a thankful heart. But come," he went on, raising the monk gently from the ground, "I will read thee a lesson even while thou art in thy present mind for it. I would show thee, my son, the fruit thou hast just gathered in that garden thy desires so greatly lust after."

Then the Prior led Bernard from the room where they were, and, taking him to a part of the building which was set aside for the use of strangers, opened the door of a small cell, and bade the monk to enter with him. Bernard started as he did so, for the first object that he saw, stretched helpless and disordered, and to all seeming unconscious, on a plain pallet in a corner of the room, was the gallant he had that day encountered. The injured knight was lying heavily on his back, with his head a little raised, and circled by cool cloths, and, on coming nearer, Bernard fancied that he was sleeping; but if so, it was the sleep of a brain anchor-slipped and wave-tossed, and he moved uneasily in his dreams, and plucked often at the bed-clothes, as though he were, unguided by mind or will, labouring at some puzzle whose secret he half held the string of—now catching, now losing it, and alike

troubled the one way as the other. He appeared, moreover, oppressed by the desire to say something, which neither his mixed thoughts nor tangled speech could arrange between them to give utterance to, and his soul seemed to be wandering helplessly between the two, appealing to them by turns, and at length wearily giving up the effort, only in a short while to try it over once more—and so on without end, again, and again, and again, like a fly scaling a window-pane of eternity.

As Bernard gazed at the sick knight he fully experienced those sensations which a man of heart feels, especially if for the first time, when he looks upon suffering he has himself occasioned. The Prior had no need to say to him —"This is your own handiwork: take thought of it." His face sufficiently expressed his remorseful anxiety for the fellow-being he had struck down, and the old man was content to give a gentle reply to the questioning looks of his young companion.

"He is better, my son," he said quietly. "The potion I have given him will, in God's mercy, remove the fever which hath threatened him. I will leave thee now to watch over him, and methinks thou wilt gladly endure that penance. When he arouseth, which haply he will before sunrise, then, my son, ask him to tell thee his name."

The Prior then pointed to a chair set by the sick man's bedside, and, when he had seen Bernard take it, softly left the room.

There is something strange, even weird, under any conditions, in watching the night pass through its changes from

darkness into day. In the world of motion suspended in sleep around us, in the midst of the breathing hosts of Universe, we feel our solitary presence to be almost like a ghost; or else, to reverse the image, as the sole thing of life standing among the prostrate ranks of the silent dead. But watching by the bed of one in sickness, of one who is lain struggling in the tightening fingers of the Dark Foeman, or making faint clutches at the skirts of the Angel of Life, the feeling is pointed and intensified. We mark every fleeting feature of Despair and Hope, we follow every ghostly footfall of the Present and Future, we are in solemn conference with the disputing voices of Life and Death, we mingle with and stand between the forms of this world and the shadows of the world to come. The hours of the night beat onwards like dark waves of a tide-turned ocean, and the wreck is slowly borne upon them—ah! if it may but be so!—nearer and yet nearer to the whitening beach that lies just in front of them; and behold, at last the sunrise, and the thousand hues of the glorious heaven, that bring promise, and peace, and joy!

So Bernard watched on, like a silent sentinel of the night; while the wind swept over the dark forest without, and the stars slowly paced the quiet heavens, and the cross on the green beyond his window grew pale and yet paler in the weird dawn-light. The sick gallant still slept his troubled sleep, unmindful of all these changes and motions of working Nature; and Bernard still tended him, now touching his pillow, now putting back a wandered hand or straightening his sunken head, and all the time marvelling at the Prior's

meaning, and the strange fate that had chosen him, the striker, to be the nurse of the man he had stricken down. As he sat there, watching the least movement of the invalid, and hoping or fearing with every fluttering change that stirred or crossed him, he grew by degrees more tranquil, and was able to look at the day's drama—he prayed God it might not be a tragedy—with the wider vision of a free bystander.

The good Prior was mistaken in one respect in judging of the effect he hoped to produce on the young monk's mind —he viewed men too much from the loophole of his monastical observatory, and his fifty years' scrutiny from this particular point—too high for the details of the objects studied—had led him to regard mankind very much as a company of children, whose passions and affections are cast near enough from the same mould, and may be expected to answer simply to the divers strings pulled to prompt them. But Bernard was not one of those emotional natures (working such kindly mischief in affairs politic or domestic) who judge actions by their mere fortuities, and brood, conscience-crippled, over a phantom *may-be*, while the palpable *can-be* or *shall-be* spreads its wings and flies for ever. After the first shock of seeing his injured antagonist, he began to view the day's adventure, and his own part in it, by the plain light of reason and through the white glass of facts. Looking on the unconscious face of the man he had wrought this hurt to, he felt to the full pity, and sorrow, and regret—but not remorse. Even in his most qualmish moments, with the object of his ruth before him, the assurance never left him that he had acted rightly, or at least unavoidably, and that if ill had come

of it, the blame could not be charged to him. His native sense told him, and with no doubt in its utterance, that he would do as much to-morrow if the like occasion called on him, though he might have once more to regret and pity the sorrow that should fall of it. Therefore the good Prior was a little wide of his mark when he supposed that Bernard would simply shed tears over his blood-stained blade, and then put it up in its scabbard, never to be drawn again. The lesson was perhaps read in the reverse; for, as we have seen, the monk, after his first surprise had passed, in the reaction that followed and with the scene before his eyes, had free leisure to meditate on the day's mischance, and to analyse his true position and feelings with regard to it. However, the Prior had still another string to his bow, and Bernard had not yet felt the arrow which that old Parthian had let fly at him over his shoulder when leaving the room of the stricken gallant.

Daylight was already whitening the dark mass of the great hill opposite, and also making a ghost of the lamp—never very robust—which had done glowworm's duty for it during its absence, when Bernard, who had for some time been lost in a dream of his own thoughts almost as tangled as those of the sick man himself, was suddenly brought back to consciousness by no less surprising a jerk than the sound, pronounced by lips close beside him, of his own name—"Alderic."

He had been pondering over the strange events of the day; the weird gloom-light of the Raggedstone, his talk with Clement, the rescue and encounter in the glade, his sweet

walk with Rosamond in the forest, his interview with the old Knight her father, and, lastly, his singular fencing-bout with the very man who had traduced his mother and had been the occasion of his own spoilt life. From this his mind easily slipped a step further, into the days of his first childhood and the old home he could just remember. He thought wistfully of those days, so different from these bitter ones his soul hated; and, dreamlike, he fancied he could still hear his father's hearty laugh, his mother's gentle summons, his elder brother's merry shouts over his games—ay, and even the barking of their favourite wolf-hound Rollo; whom, indeed (being now lost to all foothold of the firm Present), he was about to hail, when of a sudden that name "Alderic" sounded in his ears, and he made answer instead, loud enough to be heard by his mother in her little bower-room overhead —"I am here! Who calleth me?"

The sound of his own voice, as is the way with dreams (though the voice be never so natural to them), made one actor too many in the play, and the cry he had uttered not only roused Bernard from his visions, but seemed, also, to have wakened the sleeper at his side; for the latter opened his eyes, and looked slowly about him, as if in search of some object he had just parted from, and which he had, by a strange shuffle of places, followed into the present scene, and then missed there, at the moment the monk's voice came between them. When Bernard saw that his charge was really awake, he rose from his chair, and, bending over him, said quietly—

"I trust thou art feeling better. Thou hast had a long

sleep, and, when thou hast a little gathered thyself, I doubt not thou wilt feel refreshed by it."

For reply the sick knight gave a dazed look at his questioner, and in a while, speaking rather thickly and slowly, and like one picking his steps, said—

"Where am I? I—I pray thee, I know not this room—this place here. I thought I was with the King in the forest, and—but methinks I must have been dreaming."

"Thou hast had an accident in the forest," answered Bernard in a low tone, "and wast brought here to have thy hurt tended. Thou art in the Priory of St. Giles, and, of a truth, thou wilt soon be in health again."

"I remember somewhat of it," said the invalid in a doubtful voice. "I remember I was in the forest, and—— my head, my head!" he broke off in sudden distress, and trying to point out the seat of the pain that troubled him. Then, with a worried air, as though the effort to gather his thoughts was too great for his present powers, he added—"But truly I know not what hath happened to me."

"Thou art not yet able to talk," replied Bernard. "See if thou canst sleep a while longer. Thou wilt presently feel better, if thou canst do so."

The sick man did as he was bid, and once more shut his eyes, but not apparently to sleep; for the shifting lights on his face—now a flickering smile, and now a troubled frown—showed that his mind was engaged in efforts to shake off the clouds that hung about it, and to unravel the mystery of the situation in which he had awakened to find himself. As he lay there, quiet, and with closed eyes, Bernard scanned him more

carefully than he had yet done, by the fuller light of the dawn which now crept unhindered through the lattice, and made it possible to see things clearly. Something in the injured gallant's face, as he thus looked on it, excited the monk's interest, and seemed to strike an old string of his memory, the sound of which, however, he could not follow to its tune. In form and features the Knight a little resembled Bernard himself, but he was a full decade older, of a less robust make, and the expression of his countenance was weakened by marks of dissipation, and unpleasantly sharpened by an air of cynicism which his companion had noticed at their first meeting, and now again noticed with the patient's return to consciousness.

Bernard's reflections, pleasant or unpleasant, were at this moment cut short by the subject of them again opening his eyes, and asking for a draught of water in a tone and manner that argued an improvement in the speaker's health. The Prior's prediction, indeed, appeared likely to be fulfilled, both as regarded his own remedies, whatever they may have been, and the happy recovery of his patient; for the latter seemed to be at length free of the reaction which had followed his accident, and, save for a few clouds that still hovered about his head, and which the tardy dawn had not yet dispersed, began to look very much like any other invalid just emerged from a sharp illness: the hot flush, and with it the wild look, had well-nigh left his features, and memory and reason were surely, if slowly, resuming their grasp of the reins they had lately tossed aside from them; in proof of all which, after receiving and drinking the draught he had asked

for, the sick gallant, in a far firmer voice than he had hitherto compassed, said to Bernard—

"I remember better now what hath happened to me. If thou likest, we will talk a little, and that may help me to collect my thoughts."

"Thou didst mention the name of 'Alderic' in thy dreams," replied Bernard, going at once to the point of his musings. "Dost thou know any one of that name, that thou didst utter it?"

"Truly, I should do!" answered the Knight with a faint laugh. "I remember the dream now. I fancied I was in yonder forest, and was trying to call out my name, that one of those varlets might hear me, and help me to get back to my own house."

"Thy name!—What is thy name?" cried Bernard, in so agitated a voice that even the listless face of the invalid showed astonishment. "For the sake of God, I pray thee—I charge thee—to tell it me!"

"I will tell thee for thine own sake," returned the Knight, again laughing. "I have no need to hide it from thee, nor from any one that I wot of. My name is Sir Wilfrid Alderic, and thou mayest perchance have heard it spoken of before to-day."

The Prior's second string had carried its arrow, which this time hit the mark as full and fairly as even that worthy archer could have desired; for on hearing the Knight's answer to his question Bernard turned almost as haggard-looking as the sick man himself, and fell back in his chair trembling violently, and exclaiming—

"God of mercy, save me from this crime, and I will bear what yoke Thou pleasest to put on me!"

Sir Wilfrid Alderic, as he had announced himself, appeared greatly surprised at this strange behaviour of the monk, for he turned round to him, and said somewhat irritably—

"By the mass, what hath happened to thee, Reverend Father? Thou lookest as if thou hadst seen a ghost. I think we had best change places, for thou seemest to be in a worse plight than I am."

"Thou sayest well," replied Bernard in a low voice that still trembled with emotion, "and I shall bless God for His grace, if I see not a ghost truly all the rest of my days that be judged me!"

"But why shouldst thou see a ghost?" said Sir Wilfrid sharply. "And what hath my name to do with the matter, for methinks it was at the mention of that thou wast so strangely taken? Faith, man, what meaneth it all? I can make nothing of this riddle of thine."

"It meaneth," gasped Bernard in hoarse and broken tones, "that it was I who dealt thee this blow thou now sufferest from—I who brought thee to this bed of thy present trouble—I, whose accursed hand tried to rob thee of thy life—I, who should have been the last to take it from thee, the first to help thee to keep it, and who might have been—who may yet be—God and our Lady have pity on me!—thy destroyer—thy slayer—thy murderer!"

"It was thou, was it?" replied the Knight dryly, a curious expression coming over his worn features. "I think I should have known it but for this head of mine thou hast chosen to

make so free with. But I suppose it is a part of thy sacred office to play knight-errant on fit occasion—ay, faith, and to strike down thy betters from behind their backs with a cudgel borrowed off a common hog-hind!"

"I struck thee not from behind, no man shall say that of me—thou knowest well that none of our name ever did so!" exclaimed Bernard, moved out of his remorseful stupor by the contemptuous language of the injured Knight. "Thou knowest that I struck thee fairly, and in mine own defence—though God wotteth I am sore sorry for it," he added, once more in a tone of regret, "and had I known who thou wert, thou shouldst have sheathed thy sword in my body ere I had done thee the least hurt."

"*Our* name? *Known* me? By the Blessed Virgin, more riddles!" returned Sir Wilfrid with a mocking laugh. "And why art thou so sorry for that same blow of thine?" he continued, glancing scornfully at the monk. "Truly, thou hadst not much sorrow in thy looks when thou gavest it me! I pray thee, my bold Templar, my Reverend Champion, whence cometh this new-born miracle of thy sorrow?"

"Because I am thy brother," answered Bernard in a solemn voice, "because thy father was my father, thy home my home—ay, and because thy blood is my blood; and therefore by shedding it I have done the foulest sin that ever soul can be guilty of, and which I pray thee and God to forgive me!"

"It was certainly an unbrotherly deed, and I wish thou hadst kept to thine own side of the channel," rejoined the Knight with a cynical smile. "But I must e'en forgive thee, since thou sayest thou art my brother; and, certes, 'tis some

comfort to have been knocked on the head by a gentleman, and not by a lousy whipper-snapper of thine Order, as I at first took thee to be. So!" he went on, looking more closely at Bernard than he had yet done, "thou art that little Cuthbert I used to carry on my shoulders, ay, and box on thine ears when thou wert troublesome, which was not seldom—truly, thou hast repaid me with fair usury," he broke off laughing, "and thou art nothing in my debt, but something over. But tell me, my new-found brother, how likest thou thy life here in this chaste Temple? Sit thy services with good grace on thee? Singest thou loudly at matins? Readest thou clearly at lections? Art thou attentive to all thy duties? I trust thou dost give thy worthy master, the Prior, satisfaction.—Nay, do not frown at me! Verily thou art my younger brother, and it is proper for me to question thee upon these matters."

"I ask thee but one thing," said Bernard, speaking quietly and without passion—"that thou wilt forgive me this hurt I have done thee. Had we met oftener in the past," he added sorrowfully, "as children of the same father should do, this accident would not have come betwixt us."

"I have already told thee," answered Sir Wilfrid yawning, "that I forgive thee; and as for meeting oftener in the past, I have but seldom set foot here since thou didst enter this House of thine. Nay, I believe I should have lost myself in yonder forest, if thou hadst not been there to show me the ways of it! And that reminds me of somewhat that I would ask of thee, and which, as it cannot concern thy sacred pleasures, methinks I shall make a condition of in granting

thee my full grace—to wit, what thou hast done with that fair damsel whom thou sawest with me in these woods when I had the good fortune to encounter thee?"

"I saw no damsel *with* thee," returned Bernard coldly. "I saw thee chasing one as thou wouldst a roe or a hare; and by our father's honour, brother, now that I know who thou art and the name thou bearest, I marvel that thou couldst behave thyself so unknightly, and to a lady of as good degree as thou art."

"Thou splittest terms like all thine Order, and readest me a sermon pat for the occasion, too!" said Sir Wilfrid in a sneering tone. "But, *sans* doubt or doubling, my pious brother, I would plainly know of thee what thou hast done with this fair lady thou didst so gallantly play knight-errant to.—Come, thou takest my meaning now. Tell me, then: in what grotto may the fled bird be looked for, when I am quit of this cursed cage thou hast shut me in?"

"I shall not tell thee," replied Bernard in a firm voice, "neither for the lady's sake, nor for thine own, nor——"

"The pious monk Cuthbert's!" broke in the Knight with a scornful laugh. "Out with it, my modest brother, and blush not for truth or the Devil. Verily, after the sermon cometh the text, and that is the whole matter! So thou meanest to keep this damsel all to thyself, and dost refuse to let thine own brother share a morsel of her fair looks with thee? I fear thou art selfish, my brother, and that the Prior's lessons have been lost on thee, or else they preach but poorly in this House of thine!"

"The lady is not mine to share with thee," answered

Bernard calmly, resolved not to be again forced into a quarrel with his brother, "and I marvel thou dost question me about her, seeing that she herself declared her name in thy hearing. If thou art so concerned to know where she may be found, why didst thou not better listen to her when she plainly spoke of it before the whole company?"

"Because I was a fool," rejoined the Knight with an angry frown. "I heard her say somewhat about herself, and her father, and—I know not what beside. I was too excited by our 'chase,' as thou callest it, to let her speech into my head, or that blow of thine knocked it out again, for I remember nothing else that she said."

"It is as well thou hast forgotten it," said Bernard, "and I advise thee, for the sake of all concerned, to forget the lady herself, and thy late meeting with her. I would do as much for thee, and as willingly, as any man might be ready to do for his brother; but I cannot do this, and thou must forgive me for refusing to help thee in it."

"I asked not for thy counsel," replied Sir Wilfrid haughtily: "thou mayst keep that for thine own using. What thou refusest to tell me doubtless I shall find out from some friend that may prove more obliging than my own brother. Very like Sir Eustace Devereux, who hath come hither for the King's tournay (which thy brothership hath spoiled my appearing at), will be able to point out the lady to me from the description I shall take pains to give him."

"Sir Eustace Devereux!" exclaimed Bernard with a sudden start.—"Dost thou call, then, that false knave a friend of thine? By the mass, I no longer marvel at thy treatment of

this lady, for truly thou art in a good school with such as he to learn lessons of knighthood and gentle courtesy!"

"He would teach thee a lesson, if he were here," retorted Sir Wilfrid angrily—"and, certes, my young brother, so would I, were I but well enough to school thee! What, in the Fiend's name, hast thou to do with the choosing of my friends, or whether they be saints or no, after thy calendar, or with aught else in life that concerneth me or my private matters? By my troth—thou makest my head crack!—what is Sir Eustace Devereux to thee?"

"Only that he was my mother's slanderer," answered Bernard in icy tones—"not thy mother, but thy father's wife—and therefore no fitting friend for thee. His lie caused her death, and thou knowest it, and by the God of Nature, brother, methinks that hath somewhat to do with me!"

"Faith, but I do not know it," returned the Knight coolly. "I know that my father believed this slander, as thou callest it, and I should fancy he was the fittest judge of his own wife's sanctity, or——"

Sir Wilfrid did not finish his speech, and it was as well both for himself and this history that he did not. Reckless as he was, and irritated by his illness, the look in his brother's eyes halted him, and he left his broken sentence where it had fallen, and did not pick it up again. On his side, Bernard had risen to his feet, and was standing before his brother with trembling limbs and dilated eyes, the very picture of an enraged beast that, eager to spring on someone or something, is fuming to find no foe which it can grapple with. In a while, therefore, he mastered his first impulse, and folding his

arms tightly on his chest, almost as though he were afraid of having them free, contented himself with saying, or rather hissing—

"Thou art a liar, and no brother of mine! Thou hast slandered my mother, and I will slander thine in return. I believe thou hast no drop of my father's blood in thee, and I no longer blame my hand for having struck thee—nay, I would as lief crush thee with my heel as I would a foul snake in yonder forest!" Then, as his passion satisfied itself, and scorn took up the cue from wrath, he added—"But truly thou art a pitiful creature, and I am a fool to be angered at thee. Go to this false knight, thy friend, and make as merry together as it please ye over my dead mother's shame! By my father's sword, thou art only a poor jester of the Devil, and I did wrong to answer thee as a man!"

The sick Knight, who had been a little shaken out of his wonted levity by the fierce outburst of his brother, more easily regained his composure beneath this change of front, a mode of attack that better suited him, at least under present conditions. Turning, then, to Bernard with a weary air of indifference, which was not all assumed, he said languidly—

"I doubt not thou wouldst like to murder me, my kind brother, but thou forgettest that thou hast nearly done so already, and that it might be more seemly to keep thy violence till I am in a condition to answer thee. Verily, thou art a pretty nurse to wait upon a sick man! I know not if thou art my brother, indeed; but, by our Lady, I would not choose thee for a playmate!"

"Thou sayest truly," replied Bernard in a mournful voice:

" we may be brothers, but we can never be friends, and it is better that we meet not again. For my part, I will not trouble thee with my presence; and on thy side, take heed that thou cross not my path. Farewell, brother: I will go now, and send another to wait on thee."

Thus saying, Bernard left the room, and shut the door on his new-found brother; who, with an angry oath, our record informs us, once more closed his eyes, and addressed himself to his lapsed dreams, but not until he had committed his late nurse to that portion of the universe which was certainly not intended (at least, not originally) for the reception of pious monks.

Thus, too, we were wrong in our prediction: the Prior's arrow did not reach its goal, or only grazed it, or, blunt-edged, bounded back from it, to but fall at his feet, and lie there; like so many of the shafts of this bungling world—fashioned with such care—so polished, so pointed, so well aimed, so well shot—which yet miss their mark, and humbly add to the Earth's litter; and would not, may be, have achieved much more, had they had the luck to hit it as full and fairly as both we, in our ignorance, and the Prior, in his wisdom, imagined this one to have hit Bernard.

CHAPTER VII

THE BEAR AND HIS BEARWARD

Our record gives us no particular account of the home of the burly Champion who had vouchsafed a fencing-lesson to Bernard when they met at the house of Sir Edmund Dunstan. It merely says that the stout Knight, after that notable encounter, took his way back to his own abode—which we may suppose to have been a castle, and in the neighbourhood—in no very pleasant frame of mind for those who had the fortune to dwell with him. Neither does the Knight himself figure largely in this history: besides his presence in the scene already described, only crossing its boards twice—once as now to be related; and again a little later, when he plays a passing part, makes his bow to the audience, and forthwith retires to his dressing-room. He seems, indeed, to stand outside, or apart from, the central group on our Chronicler's canvas, and to be one of those personages in a story who rather throw their shadow on the events recorded of others than themselves form a substance in the drama that is being enacted.

On the evening in question, after taking leave of the old Knight, and mounting his horse, Sir Eustace had ridden off with a reckless haste that sufficiently marked the state of his temper and the previous check he had been at the pains to put on it. Before Sir Edmund and the monk he had chosen to conceal, or rather smother, his annoyance, because for

certain reasons he wished to stand well with the former; and as regarded the latter, he was conscious that he had himself provoked the conflict between them, and so brought upon his own head the pleasantry he had designed for his antagonist. But as the wounds of ridicule, especially when self-inflicted, are very apt to fester, he was no sooner free of his two companions than he became seized with the same disorder which had attacked Bernard in that youth's late interview with his brother—his soul raged for an object to vent its spleen upon. This condition neither the sharp ride nor the cool night air proved the least able to allay, and by the time he reached the gates of his mansion he was reduced to hoping that he might find the porter asleep, or guilty of some other slip of duty which would conveniently serve for letting out a portion of the ill-humour that was troubling him. But in this he was disappointed; for the porter was not only awake, but, being well acquainted with the exacting habits of his master, had even had the thought to throw open the gates beforehand, thus anticipating Providence. It is vain, however, to hope by an excess of duty to stop the mouth of an angry man; and Sir Eustace would probably have been much better pleased if the porter—who was no philosopher, and was, moreover, ignorant of what had happened—had been a little less perfect in his duties, and had obliged his master by a fair excuse for getting into a passion with him. There being no such excuse ready to hand, the incensed Knight at once proceeded to make one, and, turning to its unlucky object, exclaimed angrily—

"In the Devil's name, why dost thou leave the gates open at this late hour of the night? Mass, man! art thou in league

with all the thieves in the forest, that thou openest my doors thus for any rascal to walk in that hath a mind to? A pretty fellow thou art—a good guard, truly, to watch over a gentleman's property! I had better put a dog in thy place! I warrant he would have more wit than to leave my gates open in this fashion!"

"But, good Sir Eustace," began the porter, trying to make something out of nothing, and thus, after all, proving his claim to be a philosopher—"indeed your worship—indeed, good Sir Eustace—I thought——"

"Who the Devil asked thee to think?" interrupted the Knight irritably, and promptly seizing on this new cause of offence.—"Not I, faith, not I! I give thee not meat, and drink, and housing, to set up thy hind's brains at me, and say —'I think'! Mass, no! I choose not that thou, or any man in my service, should ever trouble himself to think. Dost thou hear me? I would have thee act, man—act, act! ay, and not leave my gates ajar at this late hour of the night."

The porter, having found speech so unfortunate, now tried the golden uses of silence, and returned no answer to the Knight's outburst save by touching his cap, and awaiting his master's further pleasure. This method, so much recommended by wise writers on anger and its treatment, seemed to succeed no better than its famous rival, as Sir Eustace, after a moment's breathing, exclaimed more irritably than ever—

"Art thou dumb, then? Body of mine, why dost thou not answer me? Am I to stand here all night till thou findest that fool's tongue of thine? Plague take thee—speak,

man! What the mischief didst thou leave my gates open for?"

Here the porter suddenly remembered his best argument, which in his trepidation he had until now forgotten, and in a more confident voice made this answer—

"Because, Sir Eustace, Mistress Edith bade me to. Indeed, your worship, she herself ordered me to leave the gates open, and to keep watch till your worship returned in safety."

This explanation apparently had its effect, for Sir Eustace, though he looked for a moment very much as if his wrath had found fresh fuel, and muttered a little about "women always meddling in men's matters," in the end contented himself with saying in a surly growl—

"And where is Mistress Edith, then? Mass, she had better have me tied to her apron, since I cannot stir out of doors but she must take such pains for my coming in again!—Where is Mistress Edith?"

"Truly, she is in her bower-room, your worship," replied the porter, revenging himself for his master's usage of him by a secret grimace in the darkness, "where she bade me say she would wait supper for your worship."

The angry Knight made no further rejoinder, but, giving up his horse to the porter, strode off into the house, and into the presence of the lady who had been thus spoken of as "Mistress Edith."

The mention of this personage brings us to another confession of error. It has been stated in a previous chapter that the burly Knight could hardly have been loved by

women; and this reflection, which ought to have been a just one, as it is based upon an exact calculation of ordinary human nature, is rendered vain through no fault of our own, but simply because women will not choose to be governed by ordinary rules. We find, therefore, that Sir Eustace *was* loved by a woman, and—to confess freely while we are at it—very faithfully. This statement, looking to the capricious temper of the Knight himself, seldom constant beyond the gratification of the moment to aught that attracted him, is tantamount to saying that the woman who had succeeded, as this one had, not merely in drawing him to her, but in holding him for long years in her thraldom, must have been possessed of an uncommon character. That "Mistress Edith" was entitled to this description is sufficiently shown by the fact that she had discovered, and been able to use, the only key to the Knight's nature which could ever have availed against him—that of making herself his master. Early plucked from her parents' hands (as our record informs us), with the usual reserve of being sent back again as soon as tired of—when that time came, she had quietly given the Knight to understand that since he had chosen to bring her to this house of his to please himself, she now meant to continue there for her own pleasure, and that he might, as she herself purposed to do, make the best of the arrangement he had set going. At first the burly warrior, not used to have his will disputed, raised a storm which would have scared the wits of most women; but Mistress Edith took it with the greatest composure, and by an equal blending of firmness and blandishment, with now and then a spice of caustic humour, that

moved the angry Knight's laughter despite himself, in the end proved the better; and this battle decided, the lady set herself so artfully to manage, and withal made herself so useful to, her vanquished lord, that soon the latter would have been as violent to oppose her departure as he had once been to promote it. Nevertheless, there were times when this Hercules grumbled at his Omphale, and incontinently threw her distaff in her face, loosening in his efforts the silken cords she had bound him with; but Omphale, when the first plunge was over, and, as always happened, ere the threads were quite broken, drew them all tight again, adding a few more by way of punishment, and the giant ever found himself a little faster in the meshes, a little further in the net, than he had been before making these heroic struggles after freedom. The Knight, moreover, in his own particular way, really loved his fair tyrant, and had grown as used, almost as attached, to the bonds she had been pleased to put on him as real prisoners are said to become to the fetters that are worn by them—which proves Habit to be the first of conquerors, the most successful of colonizers.

The lady, too, was herself a proof of this singular principle in nature, and human nature more particularly; for in her relations with the Knight, she had begun by hating him, continued by loving him, and ended—as is thought to be the way with women towards those they care for—by tyrannizing over him. We are not told what her precise age was at the time when she is presented to this history, but our record hints that she was still of considerable beauty, rather tall of stature, of a countenance wherein pride and

firmness were redeemed and softened by warmth and kindliness, and whose chief charm of expression lay in the witchery of constant change, so that no man could affirm that he knew it, but every instant of flitting time, every object of the fixed world, was stirred and coloured by it, and weariness was put off or made impossible. Such, in brief, was the lady commonly entitled "Mistress Edith," upon whom at this moment the burly Knight burst in the full blaze—save for a beam or two which had gone to the porter—of his unsatisfied wrath.

"Body of mine," he exclaimed in a loud voice, and stamping his foot upon the floor to enforce her notice, "it is strange that I cannot speak to one of my own servants, or give an order in my own house, without having thy name thrown in my face for an answer! Mass—dost thou hear me? I say it is a strange thing that I am to ask thy leave before doing what it pleaseth me to do—ay, faith, and what I mean to do—in my own house, and with my own servants!"

Mistress Edith, when the Knight entered her room, was engaged upon a piece of tapestry; and on hearing his violent outburst, she merely replied quietly, and without looking up from her work—

"Wait until I have finished this figure, and then I will attend to thy complaints."

"The Devil take thy figures and thine attention!" returned the Knight angrily. "By the Rood, a pretty pass we are got to! Forsooth, I may stand here and burst my own figure with spleen, for all thou mindest, while thou dost sit and work thy fine foolery of fashion, and takest no more notice of me

than if I were a dog, or a table, or—I know not what else that wanteth a tongue and wits to it!" Then, finding that this storm produced no answer from shore—that is, Mistress Edith, as representing calm, or, maybe, the lifeboat—he added petulantly, "But why the Fiend wilt thou speak to me like this, when I am not in a mood to be plagued by thee? Dost thou not see that I am out of spirits?"

"I see thou art in an ill-humour," said the lady with unmoved composure, and still keeping her eyes upon her work. "Dost thou expect me to take notice of that? Tell me quickly, then: what new wonder hath happened, to put thee into this—impatience?"

"Impatience!" exclaimed the Knight still more angrily. "By the mass, Edith, thou art enough to spoil a saint of his patience! Nay, if thou laughest at me—faith, I will not suffer it from thee!" he broke off in a passion. "Grace of Heaven! canst thou not leave that cursed work of thine, and deign to look at me a moment like a Christian?"

"When thou behavest like one—well, I will look at thee," answered Mistress Edith with a merry burst of laughter, and laying down her work upon her knee. "Truly," she continued, gazing full in his face, "thou art not very pleasant to see, now that I do look at thee! But sit down to thy supper here, and say no more till thou hast eaten it. In truth, my Knight, thou art but a wild animal," she added, rising, and leading him to the supper table, "and I feel not very safe from being bitten by thee till I have fed thee a little, and so got thee tame again."

The eyes of Mistress Edith were very large and very

lustrous, and she seldom turned their light full upon her "tame beast," as she was wont to call Sir Eustace, but that animal promptly yielded to their influence, and was charmed or magnetized into submission. On the present occasion, after looking at her for a moment in a way that almost justified her late comparison of him, he sat down at the table, saying with a grumbling laugh—

"Thou art as saucy as ever, Edith. By the mass, 'tis of little use being angered with thee."

"I doubt it is not much," replied the lady, also laughing, "and I should have thought thou hadst long ago discovered it. Thou knowest I am not one of those that stand in terror of thy black looks—no, my Knight, thou only makest me laugh at thee when thou art angry, thou lookest so droll over it. Verily, I think I should grow dull if thou didst leave off getting into these passions of thine! It is strange that any creature should be afraid of thee. Were I a man, indeed——"

"And if thou wert one, what wouldst thou do then, my fair mistress?" asked the Knight with an amused expression, and laying down his knife as he looked at her.

"Truly, I would box both thine ears the first time thou gavest a saucy word to me," answered Mistress Edith, with a merry look of defiance at the Knight as she knelt by his side and waited on him. "As it is, being only a woman, thou knowest how I use thee. If thou frownest, I but smile at thee; if thou swearest, then I laugh at thee; and if thou wert to do more—why, I should even whip thee like the simple animal thou art, and ever wilt be. Certes, my bear, that is all

I can do for thee, for thou wert past taming when I purchased thee, and if I have taught thee to dance a little, I cannot keep thee from growling in ladies' bower-rooms."

"*Thou* purchased me!" rejoined Sir Eustace with a loud laugh. "Body of mine, my fair mistress, methought it was I that purchased *thee*—ay, troth, and paid dearly enough for my bargain, I'll be sworn to it!"

"Then thou liest, thou unmannerly knave!" cried Mistress Edith, springing to her feet, and facing him with flashing eyes. "How darest thou, thou coward—thou vile boaster! to remind me of thy villainy and my shame? By the truth in Heaven, thou mayst thank thy guardian Saints, if thou hast any, that thou hast still that foul tongue of thine to flout me with, for if they had not befooled me into taking pity on thee, thou hadst not lived a day to vaunt thy treason!"

This tempest, the like of which seldom darkened the fair sky that was overcast by it—never, indeed, save when the Knight blundered upon the lightning-charged cloud he had just exploded—appeared to trouble the doughty Champion more than a combined onset of rival jousters would have done; and he made haste to allay, after the best cunning that was in him, the storm which his own imprudence had raised up.

"Nay, be not angered with me," he said pleadingly. "Nay, Edith—nay, my girl—I pray thee, let us kiss and be friends again. I was a fool, a blockhead, a very brute, as thou callest me; but, the Lord knows, I minded not what I was saying—I meant no offence to thee. Faith, if I did do thee a wrong once, thou hast made a good deed of it since,

for thou hast been a very angel to me, and I could not have lived without thee—nay, I should have been but a dog, and done a dog's deeds, and like enough have died a dog's death, if I had not had thee to put a leash on me, and muzzle me, and do the Lord knows what else beside for me! Come, my girl, I will e'en kneel and sue to thee, and kiss thy hand, and humbly ask thy grace for that brute's speech of mine!" which the burly Champion veritably did, showing that some small original sample of his knighthood yet remained in him, even though the main stuff had been suffered to rot away or become moth-eaten.

The wrath of Mistress Edith was but transient, and she was touched by the sight of her rude warrior kneeling, as any common gentleman would have done, humbly at her feet for pardon: therefore she bade him to rise, and, laying her hand on his shoulder, said gently—

"Speak no more of it, my Knight, for I forgive thee. Nay, I am as much to blame as thou art; and if I am not, it little toucheth now. But what hath happened to thy hand?" she added quickly, looking at the member which Bernard had given so rough a twist to. "Was it so small before, that thou hadst a mind to add a size to it out of vanity? Tell me, my poor Knight! with what tough tree hast thou been tilting in yonder forest?"

"Faith, I had forgotten the matter," replied Sir Eustace with a moody glance at his sprained hand. "I had a fencing-bout at Sir Edmund Dunstan's, with a fellow I offered to teach some passes to; and, by the Devil, who is in league with all monks, if I did not take a lesson instead of give one."

"And it was that which put thee into this sweet humour thou broughtest home with thee—was it not, my Knight?" asked Mistress Edith with a laugh, as she took the injured hand again, and looked more closely at it.

"Like enough," answered Sir Eustace, knitting his brows. "'Tis not apt to breed good humour in a man that is looked on as the best swordsman of the King's company to be beaten and disarmed by a scurvy monk who hath had no practice but what he learned over his toys in childhood. I warrant thee I had not thought that any man, let alone a gowned monk, could have played with me so lightly as this fellow did to-day."

"A monk!" exclaimed Mistress Edith, with an amazed look at the Knight. "Thou beaten and disarmed by a monk! Tell me it was the Devil, and I shall believe thee, and thou wilt have no cause to be ashamed of it. But a monk!—By the mass, no. It was the Devil indeed, or thou hast dreamed it!"

"If it were the Devil," returned Sir Eustace moodily, "Sir Edmund Dunstan was on good terms with him. Thou hast seen me fence, Edith, and knowest what I can do. Well, I tell thee this fellow—this monk—or devil, if thou likest—made no more of me than I would of a new-fledged squire; and when he had taken all my thrusts, as quietly as thou wouldst do my oaths, knocked the sword out of my hand—very much as thou dost laugh the soul out of my body when I am in a passion with thee, and thou dost wish to draw the sting out of my ill-humour."

"By our Lady, I did not think thou hadst so much wit in thee!" said Mistress Edith laughing. "Between me and the

monk thou wilt learn something. But tell me, my Knight," she added seriously, "who is this miracle of monks militant that hath been commissioned, by I wot not whom, to read this lesson to thee? If he be not a one-night's mushroom raised by Heaven for a day's service, he must be known to the world for somewhat—a man that can do the things thou tellest of and hast been a witness to."

"I know no more than I have said to thee," answered the Knight irritably. "Sir Edmund told me that he came from Wales, and gave that as the reason for his good fencing. I have not seen him before to-day, that I wot of; though, truly, his face reminded me of one I seemed to have known, but I remember not when or where. But I tell thee, Edith," he went on in an altered tone, "the strange part of the thing is this—that though I am vexed enough, as thou seest, at being thus handled by a common devil of a monk—yet, somehow, I bear this fellow no malice for it: nay, I rather like the youth in spite of it, and should be willing to know him better, ay, even to make a friend of him; and, by the Lord, I understand not this riddle that hath got possession of me, and I would Sir Edmund Dunstan had broken his neck ere I had taken fool's thought to go and visit him!"

"It is strange," said Mistress Edith with a puzzled look. "Thou art not used to forgive so easily the blows or slights which men put on thee. Neither art thou wont to pay such heed to those same thoughts of thine, when thou hast any—which is a greater marvel still. Think a little deeper, my Knight, whilst thou art about it. Art thou sure thou hast not met this reverend fencer before to-day?"

"I tell thee," repeated Sir Eustace, "that I have never set eyes on him that I wot of, and more thinking will not better my remembrance. He is not one that I should forget if I had ever seen him."

Mistress Edith kept silence for a few moments, and then said—

"And is he truly so good a fencer as thou sayest of him?"

"We fenced but with some old irons that Sir Edmund lent to us," replied the Knight. "I doubt not I should master him if the bout were in real earnest. Yet he is good enough for the best, and any man might look for stout blows that should cross blades with him.—Faith," continued Sir Eustace with a sudden gleam of memory, "I took those he gave me over-pleasantly for one that is not used to such presents, and, I now remember, he was not very civil in his returns to me; for when I jested with him about choosing him as my confessor—though I wot not if he be a priest—he made some answer concerning my *past*, as he called it, and I know not what insolence besides. Methinks he put a stress on the word, or I had not else noticed it. 'Tis like he meant nothing by it, but the way he said it sounded strange to me. Body of mine, if I thought the fellow meant meddling in my affairs, past or present, I would find him out again, and wring that monk's neck of his as a warning to the whole brood of pious busybodies!"

"Thou wouldst do nothing of the kind, and thou shouldst not so speak of the good Brethren," said Mistress Edith with a reproving frown; "and for this one, I thought thou hadst taken a fancy to him. Thou didst say as much but a moment ago."

"I took a fancy to him," answered the Knight, "because he was a bold fellow, and flew no more like one of their brood than doth a hawk like a bat or a night-owl; and moreover, because he put me in mind of that same 'past' he was pleased to give me a hint of—though the Lord knows why, for I do not."

"Perchance I might find out this answer for thee, if thou wouldst tell me the riddle plainly," said Mistress Edith, glancing somewhat doubtfully at Sir Eustace. Then, seeing that her words had not moved him from the thoughtful reverie he seemed to be lost in, she added more boldly—"Come, my Knight: I pray thee be open with me, as I have often enough begged thee to be, and tell me this strange past of thine which thou and the monk make so great a puzzle of. Thou canst not have a better confessor, no, nor a safer; and I warrant thee, if the riddle may be read, my woman's wit will find the answer to it—ay, and thou wilt feel the easier, too, I doubt not, when thou hast made a clean breast of it; and like enough, as I have just said to thee, I may find out this meaning which so troubleth thee."

"What meaning? What meanest thou?" demanded Sir Eustace, suddenly starting from his vacant attitude, and giving a keen look at his questioner. "In the Devil's name and thy curiosity, what is it thou wouldst know of me?"

Mistress Edith was a little startled by the dark look that came into the Knight's face, but gathering courage from the influence she had so long held over him, and which seldom failed her, she went on dauntlessly—

"I would have thee tell me this strange secret of thy past

which thou makest, and hast ever made, so great a mystery of, and methinks I have some right to know it of thee; and moreover, if thou tellest it me, perchance I may help thee to unlock this puzzle whose key thou art even now looking for."

It was now the Knight's turn to play the offended partner. Springing hastily to his feet, with clenched hands and threatening looks, he loudly thundered—

"I will tell thee nothing! By the living Lord, I will tell thee nothing! If thou questionest me again on this matter, I will put a stop to that busy tongue of thine—ay, faith, I will end its prating—ay, by the Lord, I will! What right hast thou to set thyself up as my judge or my confessor? Mass, my meddling mistress, tell me that, since thou hast got such a prating itch on thee!—Who told thee to ask me questions?"

Mistress Edith saw that she had got upon wrong ground, and she knew well that, however the Knight suffered her to rule him in most matters and on most occasions, there were times when she might as soon hope to shift the couchant Lion-rock of the Raggedstone as move him a foot's-pace from his fixed purpose. The present occasion she was wise enough to recognise as being one of these, and she lost no time in getting back again to a firm foothold by making a gentle and dignified answer to her angry lord.

"No one told me to question thee," she replied quietly, "and I make no claim to being either thy judge or thy confessor beyond the wish to be of service to thee, which, hadst thou been better minded to me, methinks I might have been. But thou hast spoken rudely to me," she continued in a haughtier tone—"more than my fault called from thee;

and I will not trouble thee with my presence longer, lest perchance thou shouldst forget that thou art a knight and I am a lady."

With that she made a chilling curtsey to the offended warrior, and marched leisurely towards the door; but ere she had got there Sir Eustace caught her by the arm, and besought her eagerly not to leave him.

"I am beside myself," he exclaimed passionately, "and if thou didst know all, thou wouldst be more sorry for me than angry with me." Then, with unwonted gloom, he added—"But I cannot speak of this matter either to thee or to any other, and I pray thee question me not again concerning it, for it maketh me mad but to hint at the bare thoughts of it."

"I will not speak of it again to thee," said Mistress Edith sadly, "though I am sorry that it must be so, for I can see a danger to thee in this dark mystery, which haply I might have shown thee how to avoid. But now I can only leave it to Heaven, and pray God and our good Lady to watch over thee."

"Better ask the Devil," retorted Sir Eustace with an impatient gesture, "for none of those thou hast named will lend me a hand in it. Nay, I meant no impiety," he went on, seeing the disapproval in Mistress Edith's face. "I speak but the bare truth; and I tell thee that God and Heaven will not help me in this business, and our Lady least of all. But truly, Edith, thou art full of idle fancies, and I would think no more upon this subject. Come, to change it now—canst thou set straight my twisted hand for the King's tournament? That is better worth thy skill than reading riddles."

"Thy hand need not trouble thee," replied Mistress Edith,

looking once more at the injured member. "The sprain will be got well, and thy hand be strong enough, in good time for the coming jousts.—But hark!" she suddenly added. "Methought I heard a knock at the door yonder. Who can have come to see thee at so late an hour as this?"

This question was presently answered by the opening of the door, and the entrance into the room of the very porter who had been selected by Providence to receive the first blast of the Knight's late storm of ill-humour. This worthy advanced timidly towards Sir Eustace and Mistress Edith, and, making a low bow, said to the former—

"I crave pardon for troubling your worship at so late an hour, but I forgot to inform your worship of some news that one of the forest swineherds brought hither this afternoon, and which I thought your worship might wish to hear, as it concerneth an accident to one of your worship's own friends, Sir Wilfrid Alderic to wit, and——"

"An accident to Sir Wilfrid Alderic!" broke in Sir Eustace hastily. "Ay, man, it doth concern me, and thou wast right to inform me of it. But what hath happened to Sir Wilfrid? Said not this fellow what manner of accident it was which hath taken the Knight thus suddenly?"

"So far as I could learn from the swineherd, your worship," replied the porter, "Sir Wilfrid would have had speech of a young damsel he met in yonder forest, when a couple of monks, or, I think, there were three of them—I will not be sure how many the swineherd said, your worship—who chanced to be passing, hearing the damsel cry out, set upon Sir Wilfrid with cudgels; and truly, your worship, between them, the swineherd

thinks, they made an end of the poor gentleman—may God and our Blessed Lady show grace to him!"

"The Devil take all monks—the air seems full of them!" exclaimed Sir Eustace angrily. "Sir Wilfrid is a fool, and I have often enough told him so, to be meddling with strange damsels whose business and quality he knoweth not. But these monks—what the plague doth it matter to them if a gallant chooseth to speak to a damsel? By the mass, if they are all turned knights-errant, we had better take to cowls and cool cloister!"

"But how fell it," inquired Mistress Edith of the porter, "that this swineherd of thine did not go to the help of Sir Wilfrid Alderic? And what made him bring hither the news of this accident which he witnessed?"

"Truly, Mistress Edith," answered the porter, "these poor fellows like not to be mixed up in the affairs of gentlemen, and I think he took to his heels at the first sign of violence; but presently he made bold to come back again, Mistress Edith, and he then saw the monks bear off Sir Wilfrid towards one of the forest huts, which, truly, they were about to enter, when they met the good Prior himself, who bade them carry the poor Knight into the Priory hospice, where his hurts might be attended to; and then," added the porter, turning to address Sir Eustace, "the swineherd, who had overheard the Prior mention Sir Wilfrid's name, ran hither to bring the news, for he knew that Sir Wilfrid was your worship's friend; and I hope," concluded the porter, ending with the apology he had begun with, "that your worship will not think amiss of me for bringing this news to your worship at so late an hour."

"Faith, man, no, thou hast done very well, and now thou mayst go to bed," replied Sir Eustace impatiently. Then, when the porter had left the room, he said to Mistress Edith with a puzzled look—"Well, what makest thou of this business? 'Tis good sport for one day—Sir Wilfrid Alderic knocked on the head, and my sword knocked about my heels! Body of mine, was I not right when I said that these monks were devils?"

"One black sheep doth not make a flock," returned Mistress Edith quietly, "and methinks there is but one monk in this mystery."

"Dost thou think so?" said Sir Eustace, looking still more puzzled; and then added—"But if thou art right, then who is this fellow that makes bold to beard his betters, and plays knight-errant to distressed damsels? By the mass, there are not so many monks in the Forest that one of them can do such things and not be heard of."

"He is the same thou didst fence with this afternoon," answered Mistress Edith, with a smile at the Knight's perplexed look. "I warrant thee we shall find it so."

"Ay, faith, but who is *he?*" again asked Sir Eustace, more and more moidered by this problem of the strange monk. "If thou canst tell me that—by the Rood, I'll wager to find him out, ay, and set him some penance, too, for these pranks of his!"

"I doubt not thou wouldst—truly, thou art a clever bear!" replied Mistress Edith laughing. "Listen, my Knight," she went on after a moment's thought. "Thou hast a stout heart and a strong hand, which I will presently make right for thee:

nevertheless, thou goest better in the leash—which meaneth, my Knight, that thou must do in this matter as I have a mind to counsel thee."

"Small thanks for thy praise," rejoined the Knight a little sulkily. "And what, I pray thee, hast thou a mind to counsel in this matter?"

"Only this," answered the lady: "thou must go to-morrow to yonder Priory, and see Sir Wilfrid Alderic or the Prior. Between them, we shall find out the riddle of this monk of thine."

"By the Lord, thou art in the right!" exclaimed Sir Eustace with a loud shout of approval, and starting up as he spoke. "I believe thou hast hit on the trail, and that we shall track our wolf to his hiding. Have thy way, my fair mistress. I'll promise thee to run in thy leash, and thou shalt point me even as thou hast a mind to. Faith, thou sayest well, thy wits are worth double of mine!"

"I will not strain the leash too tight on thee," returned Mistress Edith with a merry laugh. "Come, my Knight: thou hast been a good bear, after all, and I will reward thee by making that hand of thine fit to win the King's prize at the tournay."

Thus saying and agreeing, they together left the room and the argument. And so the night fell on a purpose which, had the dawn suffered it to light upon and illuminate the dial of this history, might have changed every hour and minute of that eventful calendar, and Time's day-book, so far as it concerns us, would have had another reading, or, maybe, no reading at all; but Destiny, or the will of Heaven, or those

accidents which strew our path as thickly as stars throng the Milky Way, whose voices are ever calling us to try fresh fields and strange tracks, and which make out of their wandering atoms new Earths and new Heavens for us—create, indeed, a Destiny for us—whoever or whatever may have done it, the above purpose came to nought, and this history remains written; for at sunrise appeared a messenger with a swift summons from the King, charging Sir Eustace to meet his Grace at Oxford: whither the burly Knight forthwith went, nor returned until the morning of the tournay; by which time the said purpose was no better than a rotten egg, with a spoiled chicken of Fate and this uncertain-hatching World in the shell of it.

CHAPTER VIII

A TRICK IN HEARTS

THE chorus in ancient plays performed a useful service in carrying the spectator over those troublesome details which strew every author's path, and which lie there, ready to trip him up, and his audience with him, at all the sharp bends and sudden turnings of his narrative. Our record, in a shadowy sort of way—like the ghost of a finger-post or a milestone—vouchsafes the same service for us, and from its half-effaced directions we find some hints both as concerns the main road

of our journey, and the side paths or open tracks which lead into it and become one with it. Thus, we can make out that the sick Knight after that stormy interview with his brother—which, as regarded himself, proved but a falling flash in a dark sky; and as regarded the Prior, a very chaos to that worthy prescriber's remedies—the sick Knight, we find, fell back into a fever (as his reverend physician termed it) seven times worse than the one he had just been plucked from, and for many days lay tossing on the doubtful waves between this shore and that dim other, neither of which he was quite in sight of, nor could ever get a hand or a foot upon. We find, too, that the monk Clement, doubtless at the desire of Bernard, and for sufficiently good reasons, had been assigned the latter's place as guardian of the sick man; and, a little later, that, under the young monk's steady steering, and the Prior's skilful trimming, and, above all, Nature's gentle blowing and billowing and tiding, the crippled barque got into port again—top-gallantless, timber-started, and paint-perished—altogether a good deal damaged by its rough voyage; but still sound enough to be laid in dock, recalked, perchance recoppered, and in due course floated forth on another trip—this time, it may be hoped, a calmer and more prosperous one.

Moreover, we learn that on a certain noon of a bright Autumnal day, Clement, being in need of air and exercise, was sent upon a mission by the thoughtful Prior; and that Bernard, whom we suspect of having had a hand in the arrangement, was permitted to accompany his friend and brother. At any rate, soon after the midday meal the two companions set out from the little Priory, and, plunging into

the thick forest, were quickly lost to all view of it, and, as regards Bernard, we fear to all thoughts of it.

On one point we find no plain direction, scarce even a half-erased hint, on the worn finger-post of our record—to wit, whether in the interval between their first meeting and the present time Bernard had again met with his adopted sister Rosamond, and, if so, whether oftener than once. Whether or no Bernard confided so near a secret to his friend Clement, we find that during their present walk he narrated to the latter the whole scene which had fallen out between himself and Sir Wilfrid Alderic, with all those details of incident and reflection which have been made use of in another place, and which, as we wanted them there, we felt justified in transposing. This relation carried the two friends far into the forest depths—into that very glade, indeed, where Bernard had so strangely met with his half-brother after their long separation; and those old chroniclers, the oaks, might have again hearkened to a discourse between the monks, in which Clement, as before, was the chief listener, playing the parts of counsellor and sympathizer by turns, and our hero, as is usual with heroes and lovers, the object talked about and prime mover of debate.

As the two monks stood in the quiet glade, something of the melancholy crept over them that belongs to Autumn and a great forest, especially when these make the frame of a regretful life. Bernard was the first to break the silence which had fallen upon them. Pointing to a far corner of the glade, he said sadly—

"That is the very place where I struck him, Clement.

I am not like to forget it, for I remember it even in my dreams."

"Methinks thou wert wiser to forget it," answered Clement. "It is the best course, brother, when a thing is done that we would have undone, save so far as it may serve us for good guidance."

"But I know not if I would have it undone," replied Bernard in a tone of troubled doubt. "Tell me, as thou now standest here—was I right or was I wrong, Clement? By our Lady, I cannot answer the thing for myself. I am sorry to have caused hurt to any man, and to my brother—though thou knowest what manner of soul stirs in him—more especially; yet, if the matter were to fall out again, I doubt not I should do as I have done. 'Tis strange that good and evil should dwell so closely, that we know not whose ground we set our feet on!"

"I think thou wast both right and wrong," returned Clement quietly. "Thou knewest not that he was thy brother, and if thou hadst known it, thou wert right to protect the damsel from his violence; but when he drew his sword and threatened thee—forgive me, brother, if I speak plainly to thee—thou didst forget that thou wert a soldier of peace, and thy looks bespoke nothing but strife and anger—yea, and lust of conquest, my brother, such as startled all present who beheld thee."

"'Tis the old tale o'er again," said Bernard moodily. "Thou seest what I am, Clement. The blood of my fathers runs too hot in me, and yonder cloister will never cool it while my soul and my body keep company. Thou hadst

better leave trying to mend me, Clement, for thou spendest thy pains but vainly—ay, and leave our friendship, too," he added in a mournful voice, "lest it bring thee a share of my trouble."

"I will never leave that," answered Clement with warmth, "and I would gladly bear a share of thy troubles. Thou hast no need to fear my friendship, Cuthbert," he went on a little reproachfully. "I have not thy courage, but I have enough to be true to what I have promised. Am I not even now doing a wrong to help thee in that friendship thou dost question?"

"I question it not—nay, forgive me, brother: thou art the only man living I can call a friend, save the one that is now waiting for me, and he is but a servant," exclaimed Bernard earnestly, and holding out his hand to his companion. "I know thy worth, Clement, and value it more than thou thinkest; but I am not myself to-day: some shadow hath crossed my heart, and left its chill there, and 'twill take a shaking to be got rid of! I pray thee, forget my words.—Thou wilt meet me here again at sunset?"

"I would I could persuade thee to forego this meeting—ay, and all such matters," replied Clement in a serious tone. "Thoughts of vengeance are not for us, my brother, and I fear thou wilt draw down Heaven's wrath on thee if thou dost persist in giving them welcome as thou art now doing."

"By the Rood, I am weary of being told so!" answered Bernard with a gesture of impatience. "Dost thou know what this vengeance is, Clement, as thou callest it? I tell thee 'tis no vengeance at all, but the merest justice. Hadst

thou never a mother that gave thee suck, to whose breast thou didst cling in thy babyhood, and whose hand stayed thy first steps from tottering—that thou discoursest so coldly of peace and pardon? God of Nature! is there no son left in the world, whose heart can beat out music to me, and whose voice may ring in my ears—'Go on, thou art right, Heaven warrants thee, God suffers not such a wrong to pass unpunished'?"

"I doubt not that God will punish the wrong," said Clement calmly, "in His own time and by His own means; but thou art not the instrument, my brother, and thou art daring to thrust God aside to take His work on thee."

"It is my birthright, and none shall take it from me!" rejoined Bernard with a fierce look of resolve. "And I am daring what any man would dare that was born with a spark of Heaven's fire in him! But have a care that thou dost not betray me, Clement," he added suddenly. "I have trusted thee with my soul's secret, and if by chance thou wert to let it escape thee—by the mass, I should not easily forgive thee."

"Thou art unkind, brother," replied Clement, his pale face flushing with indignation. "Thou knowest well that I would sooner die than betray thee; but I would thou hadst not parted with thy secret, since thou doubtest its safety in my keeping."

"I pray thee, take my meaning and not my words," said Bernard hopelessly, "for I and my wits have parted company. By our Lady, I would trust my life to thy keeping, if all the world else were in quest of it. I meant not that thou wouldst

betray me of thine own will—how could I, my true friend and only brother? But our good Prior holdeth me in some distrust, and perchance it might happen in confession——"

"No, not even in that," interrupted Clement hastily. "Not even in confession would I reveal this, or aught else thou shouldst confide in me. Thou knowest, and our Prior knoweth also, that I am accounted obedient both to our rules and his desires; but I would keep my soul's freedom in that —I would not betray the secrets which another had trusted to me."

"Not even if thou wert threatened with the Church's wrath —not if thy loved office were put in peril?" asked Bernard, with a curious glance at the young priest as he questioned him.

"No, not even then," answered Clement smiling, "though thou knowest my courage is not like to be put to that proof: nevertheless, I think it would suffice for it."

"Thy courage is good enough," said Bernard warmly— "nay, methinks it is better than mine. But it should never come to that, my brother. I promise thee, if such a thing were to fall between us, I would myself free thee from our bond, and give thee leave to proclaim all that I have ever breathed to thee. I love not this body of mine so dearly as to let a friend suffer for its offending."

Clement did not reply to this speech, but after a short silence, in which each of the friends seemed occupied with his own thoughts, he said to Bernard—

"There is somewhat more I would ask of thee, brother, if thou deemest it not a matter beyond our friendship. The

damsel thou didst rescue in this glade here—hast thou met her again since that encounter?"

"Ask me not that, Clement—at least, not now," answered Bernard with a sudden flush. "Think not I resent thy question," he added quickly. "Thou art welcome to see the very soul in me, and all that lies hidden there; but this concerneth not myself, and I doubt my freedom to speak of other secrets than mine own. But, in truth," he went on, "there is no secret to tell thee, and nothing thou mightest not know: if there were, thou wouldst soon enough hear of it."

"I asked thee not," said Clement, "from any desire to learn thy secrets, but, to speak plainly, because I have noticed a change in thee since thou didst meet with this fair damsel thou gavest help to. Thou wert, indeed, ever dissatisfied with thy present life, but now—I know not well how to say it in words, brother—thou art even different from what thou hast been. Truly, I feared thou hadst yielded thyself to the Devil, and fallen in love with her."

"Thou callest love of the Devil, dost thou?" said Bernard laughing. "By our Lady, I thought it came from Heaven, and that God had grafted it in our hearts from a tree of His own Paradise."

"But not for us," replied Clement, looking earnestly in his companion's face. "Is it true, then, my brother? Hast thou indeed fallen in love with this damsel?"

"I pray thee, to what end?" returned Bernard gloomily, "If I were a man and not a monk, methinks she is one that I would live and die for, for she is worthy of the best service a

man could give her, and she hath grace to lead the worst of us to Heaven. But for me (though I tell thee, Clement, I am free of what thou fanciest)—thou wottest well the beam I am yoked to, and that this world hath no love for a poor monk; unless—which thou knowest I would not choose to do, Clement—he breaketh not his vows only, but forgetteth, too, his honour and his born manhood."

"I know thou wouldst do nothing that is false or base," answered Clement sadly; "but I know, too, my brother, that thou hast long fretted against the bars of thy present discipline, and that thou needest but a finger to beckon thee from without to make thee burst through them and spread thy wings in fancied freedom. Verily, thou art in great peril, and I know not how thou wilt stand against the temptation. But I see thou art impatient to keep thy trysting. God be with thee, brother! I will await thee here an hour before sunset."

So saying, the two friends parted company, and went their different ways; Clement towards that same Raggedstone where he and Bernard appeared at the beginning of this history, and our hero pushing eastwards through the thick undergrowth until he presently entered another and smaller glade of the forest—a hiding-place so cunningly screened from curious eyes that it might almost have been, and perhaps was, a pet secret of the sly Woods, shared only with discreet Fairies and cautious wolves, and as a special favour—since he had something of Nature's freedom and wildness in him—with Bernard himself, first binding him never to reveal it to his brother mortals—a compact, as will be seen, which Bernard kept not.

There, some half-hour after Clement had left his companion, a strange scene might have been witnessed—two men, clad in thick jerkins, fencing with blunt swords, and a large hound keeping watch near them, ready to give warning at the least sign of an intruder. One of these fencers was an elderly man of strong, well-knit frame, and a swordsman evidently of great skill and long practice: the other was—the monk Bernard. A spectator, had there been any beside the hound and those old gossips, the oaks—and the former was too busy over his task of watcher to pay much regard to the human actors—would soon have noticed two things: first, that the fencers were very equally matched, for both were masters of their art, and the strength and activity of the younger made up for the maturer science of the elder; and secondly, that the affair was nothing more serious than a lesson, and the most friendly of lessons, to boot; for despite the angry clashing of their weapons, and the affected fierceness of their calls in striking or warding, their kindly looks showed that there was no malice, nor even rivalry, in the present bout, and that sport alone was the moving spirit of it. That the encounter, however, was not all for play or exercise was shortly made plain by the old man exclaiming, with the mingled respect and freedom of a privileged master of the humbler sort—

"Faith, Master Cuthbert, thou art not so quick as thou art wont to be. Three times have I tried to school thee in this same pass of mine, and, by our Lady, thou dost catch it no better than if thou hadst never handled weapons till the present hour. Come, try it again, Master Cuthbert. See if thou canst hit me, now—ay, full on the doublet here, as thou

hast seen me do these three times upon thine own. 'Tis a trick worth learning, and none will know it else, I promise thee. I taught it but to myself and one comrade, and he lieth a yard deep at Lincoln. Thus, Master Cuthbert—dost thou mark me? A feint thus, quickly: then round thine enemy's blade with a twist that would out-ward the Devil; and—so! thou hast him through his harness, and his heart is spitted like a capon! But thou must practise it, Master Cuthbert," added the old man with a doubtful look at his pupil, who scarce seemed to be listening to him. "Hast thou followed what I have told thee? I tell thee, 'tis a good trick; and thou hast but to drive hard enough, and there is no steel made that can turn the thrust of it. Come now, try it on me, Master Cuthbert. Only look that thou pushest hard enough—ay, hard enough to sprawl me on this turf here, if thou canst do it for me." Then, getting no answer from Bernard, he went on, grumbling in a low voice to himself—"Plague take the boy! His wits are gone gathering, and he hath minded no thing I have said to him. Mass, I must rouse him from his dreams, or the trick will be lost ere he learneth it.—Hark thee, Master Cuthbert Alderic!" he called suddenly, with a shout like a former battle-cry—"Stand to thy ward, if thou be a man, and have at thee for Sir Eustace Devereux and the Devil!"

This stratagem proved effective in rousing Bernard from his fit of stupor, for, with flashing eyes and a fierce cry of anger, he at once carried out his master's instructions, and so far followed them to the letter as to lay that worthy preceptor full on his back upon the sward, after the very manner he had

himself directed. This had no sooner happened, however, than Bernard threw down his weapon, and, hastening to the old man's help, exclaimed in an anxious voice—

"Art thou hurt, my good Redwald? God forgive me if I have harmed thee! Why didst thou make me forget myself with that cursed speech of thine? Truly, I forgot who thou wert for the moment. But speak to me—art thou touched anywhere?"

The old soldier made answer, much to Bernard's relief, by sitting up on the turf where he had fallen, and breaking into a hearty fit of merriment.

"Faith, thou wilt do!" he cried out, laughing, and wiping the sweat from his brow. "That thrust of thine, with a sharp blade, would have gone through the best hauberk ever hammered; and, by the Lord, it hath gone through my jerkin as it is—mass, look at the hole in it!" he added with an air of triumph, pointing to the stout leather coat that covered his chest, and which was pierced directly over the heart with a jagged rent that bore eloquent witness to his pupil's prowess. "'Tis a good trick, is it not, Master Cuthbert? and I am glad thou hast learned it so quickly."

"For my part," answered Bernard, "I am glad 'tis no worse, for I should not have forgiven myself if I had harmed thee. But art thou sure, my good Redwald, that thou art not wounded?"

"Not a jot," replied the old soldier, rising as he spoke, and clapping his hand upon the pierced jerkin—"not a jot. But 'tis a good trick, is it not, Master Cuthbert?" he again added, with a smile of satisfaction at his young pupil. "Right

over the heart, and thou hast an arm that wotteth how to push it!"

"Ay, truly, it is a good trick," said Bernard, looking fixedly at the old man, "and one I trust to try my hand at in a stiffer bout than this play of ours. Methinks I could do better against a real foe, and with a right on my side to fight for. 'Tis a different matter doing battle in a real cause, and with a real foe, to making practice between friends, is it not, my good Redwald?"

"I warrant thee it is, Master Cuthbert, be the cause right or wrong," returned the veteran, his face lighting up with the remembrance of past victories. "Practice is well enough when there is no better to be had, or to keep one's blade from getting rusty; but for a true man, give me a tough fight and a foe with some mischief in him—*that* showeth the mettle in a man! Thou shouldst have been with me at Lincoln, Master Cuthbert—only thou wast not born then—and seen the King charge amongst us after we had sent all his fellows to the devil. Lord, he was a stout man in battle, was King Stephen, for all he was so gentle with the women and children—but that is the way, mostly, with your brave men. Earl Robert was another. As keen as a hawk, and as bold as one, and the best leader of an army we had in my time. If it had not been for him, our King would not be sitting where he now is—mass, no, I'll be sworn he would not."

"I should like to have been there with thee," said Bernard, with a flush of martial enthusiasm. "Didst thou see King Stephen taken at Lincoln, then?"

"Faith, I almost took him myself," answered Redwald proudly; "for when he had broken both sword and axe on us, and his casque was fallen off his head, letting all his fair hair loose in the wind, he called out for some of us to kill him, swearing he would never be made a prisoner; but, by the Rood, no one would fetch a blow at him, and presently I made bold to cry—'Yield, my lord, for good grace, for none of us will strike thee, and thou wilt only get poor men into trouble'; and with that he looked at me, and ceased striving; and when he was got cooler he remembered me, and said—'I like thee well, my good fellow, and if ever I be King again, come to me, and I will make a knight of thee'; and, faith, he was King again after a while, but I never put him in mind of his promise—though, truly, I had as fit heels as many another, for I come from the left side of a king, and so might have worn spurs lightly enough.

"And so thou mightest, Redwald," said Bernard, with an admiring glance at the old soldier, "and I would have gladly followed thee as thy squire, but for that monk's harness they have put on me."

"Alack, no! Master Cuthbert," returned Redwald sadly: "that day's dead and gone, and the old dog is only fit to lie in a kennel now, and maybe prick up his ears time and again when he hears the hounds go past him, and thinks how he headed them all once, and ran the wolf to bay with the best and keenest of them! But thou art right, Master Cuthbert," he added after a short pause, "'twas the Devil's own trick to put thee into that grey suit of thine, when thou wast meant to be a knight and a soldier—ay, and one the

King might have been proud of, for I warrant there are not many that could stand up with thee."

"This Sir Eustace Devereux—I pray thee tell me, Redwald—is he one of them, thinkest thou?" asked Bernard, eagerly watching the old man's face as he questioned him.

"Faith, yes, he can stand up with thee—but he can lie down to thee also," replied Redwald with a meaning smile. "He is one of the best of them, so far as fighting goes; but thou art the better fencer, and thou hast proved it, though it was in play only. Thou hast but one thing—I pray thee mark me, Master Cuthbert—to take heed in him. Let him not catch thee with thy ward nodding, for he hath the force of a bull; but, God be praised! he is almost as clumsy, and if thou avoidest being brained by him at the onset, I'll warrant thou dost worst him in the finish, more especially if thou showest him this trick I have just taught thee."

"Have no fears for me," said Bernard, "I will not disgrace thy schooling, Redwald. But I pray thee—canst thou get me those arms I desired of thee?"

"Thou shalt have thy father's own harness—ay, and his sword, too, and none hath a better temper, I promise thee," answered Redwald. "Thou wilt wear a brave man's arms, Master Cuthbert, and I know thou wilt bring no stain on them."

"Not of mine own," rejoined Bernard with a dark look. "By the mass, they will be apt to the service, Redwald! Methinks my father's spirit will go with them, for the cause is his as much as mine."

"No doubt, no doubt," said the old man in a thoughtful

tone. "The cause is just enough, Master Cuthbert, if ever there were a just one—I doubt not 'twill speed with thee; and thou hast the courage of thy race, and skill and strength enough for this lump of false knighthood; and if thou hast not, thou hast but to think——"

"By our Lady, I do think of it—night and day, waking and sleeping!" exclaimed Bernard with fierce excitement. "But tell it me o'er again, Redwald, as though I had never before heard it or remembered it. It is well that I should hear it often," he added gloomily, "lest the Devil, which kindled this fire for his own ends, should have the fancy to put it out again ere it hath warmed me."

"Nay, where is the need?" returned old Redwald doubtfully. "Thou art hot enough to singe the Devil, if he came to thee, Master Cuthbert, and I would sooner help to cool thee a little than make thee warmer."

"Yet I pray thee tell it me once more—for the last time, my good Redwald," said Bernard in a pleading voice. "It will not hurt me to hear thee talk of it, and there are still some matters thou hast not told me of. Thou knowest I was a child when it happened; but I remember being with my mother in her little bower-room, and seeing my father come in to us suddenly, and hearing him speak of that villain to her; and then I remember only a blow, and being plucked roughly from her arms, and crying at the sight of her blood upon my clothes; and, by our Lady, I awoke from that nightmare to find myself with the monks in yonder Priory."

"'Twas a cruel business, and of the Devil's own making," replied the old soldier mournfully. "It fell about in this

way, Master Cuthbert, and thou knowest it as well as I do. Thy mother—God make Paradise sweet to her!—was a noble lady as ever lived, and she loved no man but thy father, and he loved her, too, and there was never a cloud darkened their heaven till the Devil and Sir Eustace Devereux made a hell of it. Well, that villain—who was then but a young gallant, and as handsome a spark as might be met with—chose to cast his foul eyes on her, and when thy father was away in Palestine he dared to tell her so; but he had such an answer for his pains as soon changed his love into hatred—ay, and thoughts of revenge to keep it company. By the Lord, though, I have never been quite sure that he did not love her still, and do what he afterwards did in hopes thy father would leave her free to him. That's a new thought for thee, anyway, Master Cuthbert. Well, thou knowest the tale he trumped, which was the truth spelt backwards, and which none but a man jealous-mad would have given an ear to. But thy father, who was much taken with this devil of a Sir Eustace, believed in it, and charged thy mother point-blank with the knave's lie, and showed her, too, the forged letter thou wottest of, and told her of that other false witness—that damned tiring-maid of hers; and when the poor lady cried out that Sir Eustace had been a foul villain to both of them—by the Lord in Heaven, if thy father did not take that as a confession of her guilt, and without more ado stabbed her through with his sword—the very one thou art to use, Master Cuthbert; ay, and I believe would have made an end of thee likewise—which is also news for thee, Master Cuthbert—but that the sight of thy dead mother stayed him; as, indeed, it did ever

after, for he never knew comfort again, and though he lived some years like a hermit, he saddened and sickened, poor gentleman! and was never a proper man more. But he could not bear the sight of thee after that, Master Cuthbert, nor of Sir Eustace, neither; and in the end I believe he well knew that the villain had lied to him of thy mother. I was there when it fell out, though thou hast forgotten it, Master Cuthbert," added the old man in a husky voice, "and I tried to speak a word to stay thy father; but Lord, he was a wilful man, and the Devil was in the business, for he only bade me look to my own wife, which he said was enough for my meddling; and then—well, I have told thee what happened, Master Cuthbert."

During this recital the young Benedictine showed none of the common signs of passion which might have been looked for from one of his temper, and with his provocation; but his drawn features and trembling limbs, and the quiet concentration of the fury that was stirring in him, made an eloquence far more terrible than the most violent of displayed emotions. As Redwald ended his account of the tragedy, Bernard griped his companion's arm with a vice-like unconsciousness which caused even that veteran to wince a little, and with a voice whose unnatural calm alone betrayed the storm in it, said—

"Tell me, Redwald—am I too young, too strong, too active, too good at fence, as thou hast fashioned me, to make it fair killing of this shameless devil that hath lived so long on this Earth he hath made a Hell of?—God in Heaven!" he went on, in a louder voice and with rising passion, "he is not

good enough for my vengeance, Redwald. When I think of what he made my mother suffer, ay, and my poor father also—for, after all, he suffered the most, Redwald—I would have him a hundred times the man he is, a hundred times more skilful, a hundred times more strong and valorous, so that he might count himself safer than common mortals—safe in that thick armour of his till the very moment when he feeleth my death-stroke, and heareth my doom-cry in his startled ears—'This is for my betrayed father! This is for my mother whom thy lie murdered!'"

"Thou art not in much need of heating, Master Cuthbert," answered the old soldier with a grim smile. "Faith, if thou gripest thine enemy as hard as thou hast griped my arm, he will not come off lightly from thee!—But what is the matter with the dog?" he broke off suddenly, as that animal gave a low growl and looked anxiously in the direction whence Bernard had lately come. "Dost thou remember his grandsire, Master Cuthbert, whom thou didst play with in thy childhood? Mass, the dog scenteth something. Come hither, Rollo—he hath the old name, Master Cuthbert—and lie down, boy. Thou art a good dog to give us warning, but thou must keep thy bites till we know the enemy."

Taking advantage of this warning, Bernard quickly changed his leathern jerkin for the monk's habit he had doffed, and he and Redwald lost no time in hiding under the broad fern-fronds all the signs of their late practice. They had hardly done so when the dog sprang out of the glade into the surrounding thicket, and a faint cry followed, which caused Bernard's heart to leap in terror; but there was no need for

his alarm, for their sagacious guardian, who knew quite as well as his masters how to smell a friend from a foe, presently reappeared with almost a grin on his tawny cheeks, and triumphantly leading in our hero's new sister, the fair Mistress Rosamond.

"Thou here, sister!" exclaimed Bernard with an amazed look. "Art thou a winged fairy come betimes for a moon-dance, or an angel dropped from yonder blue to bring a sunbeam to us poor mortals? In either case, fair spirit, welcome to this rude soil of ours!"

"In truth, brother, I am only the lost princess of the fairy-tale," replied Rosamond laughing, "and methinks it is my fate to lose myself in these woods, whose ways I have forgotten since I used to wander here." Then she added—"I was trying to find my path again, when I overheard thy voice in this clearing, and made hither to ask thee once more to show me the way to my father's house. So thou seest, brother, that I am no fairy, or I should not have to seek the help of mortals."

"And I am glad thou art not," said Bernard gaily, "so that my aid may still be needed. I pray thee go now, Redwald," he continued in a whisper to the old soldier, "whilst I lead this lady to her father's house; and I charge thee, my good Redwald, fail me not with those arms thou hast promised me."

"I will not fail thee, if I be alive," returned the old man with a stolid smile, as he gathered up the hidden witnesses of their late encounter, and prepared to take his leave. Just as he was going, however, and after doffing his cap courteously

to Rosamond and Bernard, he appeared to hesitate a little, as though in doubt, and finally, retracing the steps he had taken, whispered earnestly in the ear of his young pupil—

"Be sure thou rememberest that trick of mine, Master Cuthbert. 'Tis a good trick, I warrant thee—straight to the heart, if thou drivest hard enough, and no harness will turn the thrust of it. Be sure thou rememberest it, Master Cuthbert." And with that he doffed his cap again, and left the clearing.

When he and the dog were fairly out of sight and hearing, Rosamond turned to her companion, and said seriously—

"What did that old man whisper to thee, brother? And what mean those swords he took from yonder hiding-place? Alas! brother, I fear thou art still thinking of thy vengeance. I hoped thou hadst been persuaded to let that go from thee."

"Truly, sister," answered Bernard lightly, "he is only my father's old follower; and he giveth me but a fencing-lesson on occasion, to keep my limbs from getting stiff in yonder cloister. We did not think thou wouldst have flown here to find us at it."

"But thou doest it for a purpose, thou comest not hither for only practice—thou art still thinking of that vengeance of thine, art thou not, my brother?" asked Rosamond in a grave tone, and looking earnestly at the young Benedictine as she questioned him.

"Doubtless there is a purpose—verily, there is a purpose in all things which concern us poor mortals," replied Bernard evasively—"but none, my sweet sister, that need trouble thee. Nay, look not so gravely at me," he added with a smile, "or thou wilt make me feel like a schoolboy caught over some

misdoing. When thou art with me I love not to talk thus seriously—no, nor to think so, neither—for I have enough of it, and to spare, when I am away from thee."

"Thou art not frank with me, brother," said Rosamond sadly, "and how can I be of help to thee? When we made our bond that is between us, didst thou not promise to tell me all thy troubles, and was I not to counsel thee and comfort thee as a sister might her own brother? See now, at the very beginning, how thou hidest even thy purpose from me. That is not keeping our bond, brother, and a broken promise is little worth treasuring."

"By our Lady in Heaven, hint not at our bond breaking," exclaimed Bernard in an agitated voice, "unless, truly, thou wouldst have me to be broken with it; for I swear to thee, my sister, it is all that holdeth me to life and Earth, the only joy I have ever known or am ever like to know, and if thou takest that from me, death and my enemies shall be welcome to what is left of me!"

"But if thou dost so prize it," rejoined Rosamond pleadingly, "why wilt thou put it in peril by this violence thou art now planning? Methinks, brother, we do not so lightly hazard what we most value."

Bernard paused for a moment ere he made answer; and then, speaking with deep emotion, said—

"Because, my sister, this is the one thing between us, the only thing in all this world, wherein I cannot listen to thee or follow thy sweet counsel, and that is why I wished not to speak of it to thee when thou didst question me concerning it. And as for the peril, I promise thee, sister, it is not great,

not greater than befitteth my manhood and my cause; and were it even so—truly, my sister, thou hadst better weep for a brave man's death than laugh over a coward's safety."

"I know thou art brave," said Rosamond in a tone of sorrowful resignation, as seeing her cause was vain and past her helping, "and I have heard thou art very skilful; but I fear, brother—nay, I have a sure sense of it—that however this danger falleth, its shadow will spoil and wither our promised friendship. I wot well thou dost not heed me, brother: thou only deemest it the fancy of a foolish girl; but I fear me thou wilt think of it too late; and it is strange, brother," she added, smiling through her tears, "that we pay so little heed to our own warnings, that only when the blow hath fallen do we remember the finger which beckoned us from the peril."

"Thy finger would suffice if any might," answered Bernard, deeply stirred by his fair companion's emotion; "but this cause is not thine, my sister, and I cannot turn aside from it—no, not even for thy sake," he broke off with passionate earnestness, "and there is none beside thee and God—and I believe not that God frowns on me in this matter—that could move me a foot's-pace from my present purpose. But I darken thy life already," he went on mournfully, "and it had been better for thee if thou hadst never met with me; for what am I, that my cloud should come between thy beams and the sky they might haply brighten?—By our Lady, I am born to spoil the light of others!"

"Say not so, brother," returned Rosamond gently. "My beams shall help to lighten thy cloud, and methinks they will

shine all the brighter for it; and if they do not, I am content to share thy darkness. Come, brother: let us walk on now through the forest, and leave behind us these cares we have brought hither. I will speak to thee no more on this matter, but only try to make thy path brighter with my beams, as thou callest them; so that I may truly be a sister to thee, and thou mayest perchance feel the gladder for my shining."

Then Bernard took her hand and kissed it, and let it not go again; and as they walked on, hand in hand, through the quiet forest tracks, it seemed indeed as though they had left care behind them, for they talked, and laughed, and jested, and made merry over a thousand trifles that concern not this history, nor, it must be owned, themselves very much, and found leisure, even, to note and admire the glowing yellows and crimsons and copper-goldens of Nature's last and most glorious of apparels. Sometimes they walked soberly, with thoughtful steps, and in musing silence, making a mystery of their own happiness; and sometimes they ran sportively, blithe as hares racing their shadows in the moonlight; and the light Autumn breeze ran along with them, playing elvish tricks with Rosamond's fair tresses, and whispering wild things, by turns, in the ears of both of them; but the wicked Forest, contrary to its wont, neither laughed nor said much to them, having, wicked though it was, a conscience, and being a little doubtful, now that it was too late, of the mischief its cunning magic had created; the more so, as presently Bernard, who—to choose a comparison from his own calling—had all this while been like a cloister with the noontide sun dancing in it, winning smiles

even from the grim-featured saints on the bosses of the vaulting, suddenly became as grave as that cloister when the cloaked Night solemnly paces it, and turning to his companion, whose laughing eyes looked in questioning wonder at this strange change in him, said sadly—

"Sister, I am so happy in our friendship that I must needs doubt of it. Even now, when thou didst hint at our bond breaking, I told thee that I would sooner die than have it so parted, and, by our Lady, I spoke truly to thee. Yet I know not, sister, if I should not, of mine own will, give thee back this promise thou hast blessed me with—ay, and with mine own hands break this precious bond which I hold dearer than all the days of my life, and which to keep an hour—to take but the memory of hence with me—I would gladly give my life, nor think I had lived vainly with that guerdon!"

Rosamond's startled look, and pale, quivering face, showed the agitation which this abrupt speech had caused her; and in a low, breathless voice, weak as a dying whisper, she gasped tremblingly—

"Break our bond, brother! I pray thee, what meanest thou? Why must our friendship be thus ended?"

They were standing beneath an ancient oak, grave and solemn-visaged enough for two shy mortals to feel at ease under; and its great branches, with thick canopy of glorious yellow, were stretched out over their young heads almost as though it were a good man's blessing, or, it might be, a wise man's warning. Rosamond, her fair hair tumbled about her shoulders, with pale face, and tearful questioning eyes, looking like some blithe creature of the woods suddenly stricken

amidst its gambols, was leaning against the rugged trunk of the old tree, and earnestly regarding her companion; who, standing just in front of her, with bare head, and features as agitated as her own, at length found answer in doubtful, faltering fashion—very different to that Bernard who had laid his haughty brother on the sward, and wrung the sword from the proud hand of Sir Eustace Devereux—

"Because—Rosamond, my sister—I have broken our bond already—because I have not kept my faith with thee—because I cannot love thee as a sister; and God, or men, will not let me love thee as my heart biddeth me to—as Nature calleth me to do—and therefore——"

The young Benedictine drew nearer to his renounced sister, and taking her hand, which was not withdrawn from his, went on in broken tones—

"But I pray thee, sister—I may call thee so once more ere I leave thee—think not all evil of me—drive me not from thy sweet presence as one that hath ever nursed an ill thought for thee! I am not worthy—I have no right to the name of brother—I have broken our precious promise in pieces, and I give thee back thy half again—by our Lady, my half I will take to the grave's keeping with me! But I swear to thee, Rosamond, my best friend—for the last time, my beloved sister—I would not wrong thee in my lightest thought, in my freest fancy! Believe me, with no witness but our two selves and the pure Heaven that is above us—I knew not my heart's treason until this hour—until this very moment when that treason hath confessed its guilt to thee!"

As Rosamond listened to this speech of her lost brother,

the colour returned to her pale cheeks, her hand lay a little closer in his own, and her head sank softly upon his shoulder; and presently, in a trembling voice—which came whispering up, like a broken stream, from between the strong arms that, rocklike, environed and sheltered her — she made answer to him—

"I blame thee not, for I am as much to blame as thou. I love thee, too, my brother—brother, as thou sayest, no more—and I ask not for my promise back again, for methinks I should die if thou wert to take this friendship from me. I pray thee, let us keep it even as it is, for I am content with the love thou givest me, and I can love none other beside thee!"

After that, the madcap Forest found its breath again, and began to laugh a little, as fancying it had done a wondrous thing; but we, and our record to boot, having neither breath left in us nor any desire to laugh, only follow at a distance the two lovers, and watch them wending their slow way through the woods, till they reach the great clearing where Rosamond must needs part with Bernard, and Bernard must hie back to his Priory: wondering, as we see the one tripping over the drawbridge of her father's Keep; and the other, when the last hem of his companion's dress has vanished, and some time after that, fading into the ghostly glory of the darkening forest: wondering much in our heart and mind what Heaven and our topsy-turvy World will make of this strange business, and how the Fateful Sisters will unravel this knotted tangle (surely the most ticklish one that ever came into their hands!) —whether they will be at the pains to gather it all out, bit by

bit, till the last thread of it be got straight; or whether they will lose patience, and incontinently cut it with their sharp scissors, and so at once solve the puzzle of it—alike for themselves and for Eternity.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOW OF THE SUBSTANCE

It has been stated, on the authority of our record, that the burly Knight only once more crosses the stage of this history after his late appearance with the lady called Mistress Edith; and this is true with the exception (which makes our present apology) that, for the purposes of art, or, more strictly, convenience, we have chosen to divide one scene of the drama, as we found it, into two, and thus falsify our own playbill.

We find, therefore—and herewith give it as a short front scene by itself—that during the night preceding the King's tournament Mistress Edith dreamed a strange dream. It appeared to her that one Winter's afternoon long ago, when she was only a bright-haired, merry child, she was wandering in the great forest beyond her father's house, and seeking playmates in all the living things there — the limp-laid plants, or flitting birds, or scampering lesser beasts—and revelling in Nature's freedom and freshness as but a young child can do, or perhaps a lover before marriage, or,

maybe, an unpublished poet. Presently, as she looked up in the amused face of a beautiful Beech, she was startled, and gave a little cry, at seeing a strange, dusky, and, to her, most uncouth-fashioned object lying, or rather hanging, in the only hollow of the tree she could distinguish; and as she kept gazing at this object, eye-bound and soul-spelled, wondering what manner of queer thing it could be, she fancied its fair guardian, the shapely Beech, looked down on her with a pleasant smile, proud and yet tender; and in her childish trust, and child's willing faith in the marvellous, she smiled back in return to it, and grew almost reconciled to, even curious to make acquaintance with, the creature it guarded and which had so scared her. Then, as she still gazed, and still smiled and was smiled at, she suddenly became conscious that she was no longer alone in the forest, and, turning round, she beheld a young man close behind her, who—and that seemed the most strange of all—appeared not to be aware of her presence, although, like herself, he was gazing at that dark object which had at first attracted her. Moreover, it seemed to her that the young man had no sooner come there than the pleasant smile faded from the fair face of the Beech, and that a grave look, she almost fancied a frown, had taken its place; and then, turning again to observe the new-comer, she noticed that he held in his hand a crossbow, with an arrow ready strung on it, and it struck her that this must have been the cause of the changed expression in the comely tree. Soon after this she was startled by the swift whiz of a passing shaft, which almost grazed her head as it flew; and, glancing up, she saw it enter the hollow in the Beech's heart, and

pierce its smooth substance, from which the sap, that looked like human blood, gushed out freely, while the smitten tree, she thought, quivered and shuddered from its roots to its topmost branches, and a sob appeared to come from it so sad and wailful that it wellnigh awoke the sleeper from her dream. She noticed, too, that the strange creature she had been watching was also wounded by the arrow—in that part of it by which it clung, suspended, to the roof of the hollow; for presently it shook off its lethargy, and, tearing away its pierced limb from the shaft, flung itself with a bird-like cry into the air; and then Edith saw that it was a Bat. A huge Bat it was, larger than she had imagined to be created, with a great beaked head, and dark spreading wings, that never ceased tremblingly beating the air, and with long ape-like claws, one of which it dragged, bleeding, in its flight. For a long while it hovered round them, as if in doubt whither to go, wheeling and darting ever nearer and nearer to their heads, and more especially circling over and threatening the young man with the crossbow, for it scarce paid any heed to the child's presence. At length, however, just as it seemed ready to strike its enemy in the face, and just as that enemy had got a second bolt on the string for it, of a sudden it wheeled about, and flew off towards a dark covert, whence there slowly issued ten other Bats, much blacker and greater in size, and one still more so than the rest, to meet it and bear it away with them; and then the whole scene faded, and Bats and Beech and Bowman fled forth from Edith's wondering eyes.

Then, in a twinkling, after the quaint delirium of certain

dreams, the same scene and the same actors danced before the sleeper's brain, but grotesquely different, wondrously changed—as remote from their former selves as old Time, the present decrepit, from that young shoot of Eternity in whose rind the first mortal graffed the rank buds of man's first sin. A whole ocean of years seemed to wash its wan waves between the shores of that Past and this Present which the dreamer thus gazed upon; yet they were mysteriously blended and made one by Edith's own presence, which—unconsciously to them, strange as a ghost moving among the living, or a living thing among ghosts—crossed the scene like a vessel trading betwixt, and bearing messages to and from, the one and the other. Other actors, too, had entered, who mingled mistily with the earlier players on the stage of the sleeper's dream—Edith's father and mother, standing in front of their pleasant home (which by some means had got into this scene), tending the Spring flowers, and smiling at their fair daughter, a child no longer but a grown maiden. After that came a swift shifting—the old man wringing his hands and crying on Heaven to right his wrong, her mother weeping and lamenting and entreating by his side; for on a sudden the young man with the crossbow—now a stout knight, fierce, strong, and lusty—had seized the girl in his arms, and borne her, struggling and praying as she might, to his castle on the forest marge. Then Edith, in her little boat that went without guiding, flew quickly over the dancing waves, and followed the years of her long captivity, until the chains of their own will, from time and rust and use, fell off her hands, and—dream-like, too—she merged into a dull day-break of freedom. Rapidly scanning the wake

of the years behind her, she saw how she had at first loathed herself and the man who had wronged her, and how, also, she had brooded over and planned the destruction of one or both of them. Then, this purpose failing, how revenge, and even hatred, had slowly languished and at length wearily sunk to sleep; and how Habit, like a weed stealing the whole soil to itself, with a root deep down here, and a fibre stretched far along there, had by degrees out-grown all the flowers of fair Scruple; and how, unawares, she had come to make the best of her own good and the Knight's evil—nay, even to find the good in him, and to cherish it, and in the end to love it, and to feel that she would not change it for another's better.

Then Sleep, that great scene-shifter, again changed the pageant of her dream, or rather, being a deft scene-painter as well, only touched up the wings a little, and with a broad brush and some fresh colours pictured another season and an added age. It was the same scene, the very spot in the forest where her childish feet had wandered, and the old actors were there still; but the time was the present, the actors were all aged or altered, and the forest was aglow with sunshine and Autumn splendour. The first object that Edith noticed was the fair Beech she had once played beneath, now no longer standing proudly among its woodland sisters, but lying prostrate, a mere cumberer of the ground, a wreck and derelict of the grace and glory she remembered; and as she scanned it with sad surprise, she saw a new actor cross the stage—an old man of rough presence but noble looks, who, coming nearer to it, shed some tears over the leafless trunk, and exclaimed mournfully as he passed away that the sap had

all flowed from the wound the arrow had made there, and so the comely tree had been cut down and left to perish. Then Edith saw enter the same young man—the stout knight she so well knew—who had wrought this evil; and she saw him, too, like the old man that had just gone, walk up to the fallen Beech and gaze remorsefully on its wasted stem and withered limbs; and as he was thus lamenting over his own handiwork —lo! Edith felt a great wind above her head which made her shiver and turn cold, and, looking up, she beheld again that dark, fearsome object, the wounded Bat of her first vision, only grown to more than twice its former size, of much blacker hue—especially its huge wings, which, as before, it ceased not to flutter, but with a broader, more brooding motion—and with a beak so sharp, and hooked, and massive, that she almost fancied it had been borrowed from some friendly eagle. But while the sleeper was watching the motions of this strange visitor, she saw that the knight had noticed it also, and that he had started hastily from his reverie, and with a quick cry of alarm, which moved her wonder coming from him, had drawn his sword, and was holding it threateningly towards the Bat; and she was about to call out to him to spare its life, when of a sudden the weird creature, which had flown within arm's-reach of the knight's weapon, changed into a cowled monk, and its great beak into a bright sword, and in a twinkling, ere she could move a step or give a shout, she saw her Knight pierced through and fall backward—and then Edith cried aloud, and her dream was ended.

As the sleeper opened her eyes, and while the clouds of her

dream were heavily rolling themselves away, those light-hearted messengers, the sunbeams, were driving a merry dance—merry as only sunbeams, fairies, and very young mortals can trip it—up and down the walls, along the floor and ceiling, across the bed, and a few of the boldest over Edith's troubled face. But not even they, emblems of mirth and holiday as they are—aided, too, by a lark in the blue sky outside, that was carolling almost as blithely as it had done in Spring, and by the soft Autumn breeze that was stirring rival music among the bright forest leaves—not all that winsome Nature and a smiling day might do could charm the cloudy care from the knitted brow of Mistress Edith; who, regardless of all these blandishments, quickly dressed herself, and hastened to the hall below, to make inquiry if her absent warrior had yet returned. It chanced, however, that the first person her eyes encountered was the Knight himself, who was busily engaged in selecting a suit of mail, and in trying the temper of divers weapons, in readiness for that looked-for day's tournament.

"Thou hast risen early, Edith," cried Sir Eustace, hastily greeting the lady, and then resuming his hindered task. "I have but just got here myself, having left the King at Hanley, and ridden over to make ready for to-day's jousting. But hast thou slept badly?" he added, glancing up again, and noticing the scared expression of his companion's face. "Thou lookest as if thou hadst been keeping vigils, and hadst seen a ghost in them!"

"I would thou mightest grant me one favour," replied Mistress Edith earnestly. "I know well thou wilt not, ere I

ask thee; but yet—I would bless God and thee, my Knight, if thou couldst be persuaded to listen to me in this matter."

"Faith, it must be a great favour that needeth so grave a preface," answered the Knight laughing; "but thou must tell it me first, my fair mistress, ere I make promise to thee."

"I would have thee not go to this jousting," returned Mistress Edith timidly, and taking a nervous plunge into the doubtful depth of her petition. "I pray thee, my Knight, to feign a sickness, or to make what excuse seemeth good to thee; but do not, as thou hast any love for me, leave this house of thine to-day—do not, for God's sake, and for my sake, ay, and—though I wot well thou scornest all danger that may come to thee—for thine own sake also, go to this tournament thou art now arming for; for I tell thee there is a peril in it thou little dreamest of, and which will strike thee when thou art least thinking of it—ay, even wert thou twice the man thou art, and were thy sword twice as sharp, thine arm twice as strong; for truly, my Knight, it cometh from God alone, and only by seeking God's counsel, by taking God's warning, may it be shunned by thee!"

"Thou art mad!" exclaimed Sir Eustace angrily, and gazing at his counsellor with blank looks of astonishment. "By the mass, not go to the King's tournament! Why, I am his Grace's own champion, the chief challenger among all the knights, and if I went not—I should be branded as a common coward! God's death, mistress! I would sooner die a thousand times, suffer tortures thou hast no thought of, than have my name and my knighthood so blotted! And as for feigning sickness—body of mine, who would believe that I

ailed aught?" broke off the Knight with a loud laugh, and giving his stalwart figure a satisfied shake by way of protest. "Why, what hath happened to thee, Edith? I thought thou hadst come here to buckle on my arms for me, not to scare me with faint fears from making use of them."

"Have I not done so often enough?" replied Mistress Edith in a sorrowful voice. "Ay, and I will do it for thee as many times more as thou hast a cause to arm for—but not this time," she added with a chill shudder that seemed to reach even the stout nerves of Sir Eustace—"not this time, my Knight, if thou wilt e'en hearken to my counsel; for if thou goest forth to-day my heart misgives me that I shall never buckle arms on thee again! But thou wilt listen to me, wilt thou not, my Knight?" she went on pleadingly, and laying her hand on his broad shoulder. "I pray thee, for the sake of our long friendship, and by all that hath been between us, thou wilt even heed me for once, and let this jousting fare without thee as it may?"

"By the Lord, what hath happened to thee?" again asked Sir Eustace, moved in spite of himself by the earnest manner of his companion. "Thou art not wont to be so fearful, Edith. Hast thou seen a ghost, in very truth? Or hast thou only had the nightmare after supping? I warrant 'tis but some ugly dream that hath put thee into this scare of thine."

"I have had a dream," answered Mistress Edith solemnly, "which I doubt not came from God or else the Devil. I have had many dreams that were ugly enough while they lasted, but which I heeded not when I had done dreaming them. But this one was not like the others, for I dreamt of

things I never knew before; nor, in truth, do I know them now, save only that they point to some danger against thyself, and I am sure this dream cometh either as a threat or warning."

"A dream!" cried Sir Eustace with a laugh of contempt. "And thou wouldst have me to forego the King's tournament for a dream? Faith, not I, my fair mistress, if thou dreamest all thy wits into a vapour! Thou mayst dream, and dream, and dream—I warrant my arm will not strike any fainter for it, nor my lance aim any wider! By the mass, no! Not all the dreams ever fashioned shall scare me from my place in this day's jousting!"

"Thou thinkest but of thine honour and men's fair speech of thee—what are they to me compared with thy life and thy safety?" returned Mistress Edith with tearful eyes. "Truly, my Knight, thou hast taken all from me but thyself, and if thou takest that also, I have nothing left save to die with thee; and, by our Lady," she added mournfully, "I would I were a knight as well, that I might go with thee to this jousting, and share its blows with thee—that were welcomer than sitting here, idly waiting for ill news which may come of thee!"

The burly Knight liked not to see a woman weeping, and his fair companion least of any: moreover, he was much perplexed by this sudden whim of hers, which suited strangely with her bold temper, that was wont rather to urge him to brave deeds than to dissuade him from them. Especially was he bewildered in the present case, which concerned but a common tournament, and where the danger to one of his

proved prowess was of such small account that on no previous occasion had Mistress Edith been at the pains to reckon with it. Nevertheless, her evident trouble on his account, and her own desolate position, which she had hinted at, in case of accident to himself—a position his conscience confessed he would be responsible for—a little touched him, and though he laughed at the very notion of abandoning his post in the coming lists, he made some effort to sooth her terror and stay her tears.

"I thought as much," he said, in a tone half coaxing, half irritable: "thou art frightened at a ghost, after all, Edith. Thou knowest well enough that there is no peril to me in this jousting, no more than thou hast seen me encounter—how many times I wot not since thou hast been with me. Have no fear: I shall be back to sup with thee in good time; and, I promise thee, thou wilt not be so soon widowed as thou dost fancy."

"I am not thinking of myself," replied Mistress Edith sadly. "I care not so greatly what may happen to me, if only I can save thee from this danger which threateneth thee. Thou thinkest it but an idle dream, and that I am scared by a weak woman's fancy," she continued, buckling on his armour while she spoke. "Well, let me tell thee this dream of mine, and if thou heedest it no more when thou hast heard it, thou shalt joust as freely before the King as thou hast a mind to."

Then Mistress Edith told her dream to Sir Eustace, and its effect on him fully equalled her expectation, but in a way far otherwise than she had desired; for as she finished her account

of it, and buckled on the last strap of his armour, the Knight turned hastily from her, and said angrily—

"I see thou hast been prying into my secrets, mistress, as I warned thee not to do when thou didst last talk of it! Dost thou think I am a blind fool, that I should believe in this dream thou wouldest put on me? I wot well thou hast been prating to the Prior, or to some other busy gossip that hath somehow got wind of the matter, for no dream could have told thee what thou hast spoken of, and I am not blind enough to be fooled by it. By the mass, I did not think thou wouldst have played the traitor, Edith!"

"I have seen no one, I have not spoken to any man—I have not left the house since thou departedst from it," exclaimed Mistress Edith in despairing tones. "By our Lady, I am no traitor, my Knight, and I pray thee be not offended with me. Go, if thou hast set thy mind on it, to this jousting, but I pray thee go not in anger with me, for I swear before Heaven and our Blessed Lady that I have done nothing to deserve it of thee, and I would not thou shouldst go in wrath from me to this tilting!"

"By the Rood, but I am offended, I am angered with thee," rejoined Sir Eustace moodily. "Thou hast broken faith with me, mistress, and hast been prying into matters I bade thee keep thy meddling fingers from. I warned thee I would not suffer it either from thee or from any other, and thou hast taken thy choice, and must abide by it—body of mine, thou hadst best let it alone!" he added with gathering wrath, seeing that she was about to plead again with him. "I tell thee I am angered with thee, and am in no mood to talk further on

this business. It may be I shall have forgiven thee by supper-time, but the Lord knows it will take some tilting to forget this dream of thine!"

With that the angry warrior seized his sword, and strode hastily from the hall, without deigning a word of farewell to his weeping companion; who, in her turn, ran tremblingly to the door, and called after him, and begged him to listen to her, at least to forgive her ere he went; but had for answer only the echoing flight of the Knight's horse, as it bore its enraged master to the lists of the fateful tournament, beyond the sound of Mistress Edith's prayers and the sight of Mistress Edith's tears.

CHAPTER X

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SHADOW

It would not serve the purpose of this history, even had we the authority of our text, to give a detailed account of the tournament which took place in the great clearing outside Sir Edmund Dunstan's castle. Descriptions lengthy enough to satisfy the most curious are to be found in many works, both ancient and modern, of these warlike sports which so delighted our ancestors; but in the present case our Chronicler, who seldom strays very far from the main track of his journey, sketches the general scene only faintly, reserving his broad brush and bright colours, and all his best effects of light and

shadow, for those personages who concern his immediate narrative. We, who faithfully follow him, must be content, therefore, with such glints and glimpses as he has chosen to make us free to; imagining, as best we can, the pageant of that bright Autumn day—the paled lists, with the armed knights doing valiance for fair fame and their ladies' favours; the mounted marshals, attended by the heralds, pursuivants, and a dizzy circle of lesser satellites; the King on his raised dais, and with him many great nobles, and some greater churchmen; the painted galleries thronged with gay ladies and sprightly gallants; the shouting crowd of struggling gazers without; and withal, the cries, plaudits, clash and clamour, the thousand sights and sounds that made the chorus of a grand spectacle of arms in the days when chivalry was a living thing and had a soul in it.

Our Chronicler gives no description, doubtless deeming it beyond his sphere, of his Grace King Henry the Second; nor of that other great figure, which may almost be said to share the canvas of the time with him—the famous Thomas à Becket, then Archbishop of Canterbury, once the King's Chancellor and prime favourite, and even yet called by the name of friend.

With the King and Becket were many nobles and gentlemen known to history; and, among others, those four knights of the royal bed-chamber—Fitzurse, Tracy, Brito, and De Moreville—who a little later wrote their names in the book of fame with the blood of the great Churchman they so murderously harried to death. On the present occasion, however, the hereafter murdered and murderers were seated in friendly

fellowship, and engaged in pleasant enough converse on the events that were passing before their eyes. The King himself was in high good humour, for the day had thus far gone without a hitch; no mischance had befallen, as sometimes happened, any of the rival jousters, to cloud the sunshine of sport or victory; and the royal favourite-at-arms, Sir Eustace Devereux, had well sustained his old renown, defeating with small hindrance all knights that had had the boldness to dispute his challenge or the ambition to prove his prowess. After the last of these encounters, and after unhorsing his opponent with a skill that won him loud plaudits from his knightly critics, as well as from those fairer ones in the gallery who clapped their hands and zealously waved their handkerchiefs to him, the King summoned him to draw near, and, leaning over the front of the raised dais on which he sat, said with a smile—

"By our crown, thou hast done better than thy best, worthy Sir Eustace, and hast well kept our honour and thine own. We remember not to have seen thee tilt more deftly since thou didst first handle lance in our name. Truly, we have not a stouter knight in all this Kingdom."

"Your Grace is pleased to flatter me," replied Sir Eustace, bowing low over his horse's head, "but if I have done aught to merit praise, it is because I am your Grace's Champion, and so carry somewhat of your Grace's spirit into the play with me."

"We did not know thou wert so apt a courtier as well as jouster," answered the King laughing. "But, good Sir Eustace, we have missed a friend and neighbour of thine in our present tilting. Sir Wilfrid Alderic is not wont to leave

his lance out of the lists as he hath done to-day. Dost thou know what hath become of him, that he is thus absent?"

"'Tis said, your Grace, that he hath been wounded in another kind of tilting," returned Sir Eustace with a dark look. "A monk knocked him on the head with a cudgel, and that is why he cannot take his place in the present lists. I fancy, your Grace, that the pious Brother struck him from behind, and in a quarrel over some stray damsel in the forest here."

"St. Denis, he shall be punished, then!" exclaimed the King angrily. "How sayest thou, my lord Archbishop?" he added, turning suddenly to Becket. "The sheep must be outgrowing their shepherd when they learn to play at wolves in this fashion. Thinkest thou not that a muzzle would well suit the mouth of this wild lamb of thine?"

"I cannot say, my liege, until I have seen both sides of his mouth, and of the other animal likewise," replied Becket quietly. "When a dog hath been fighting, he is apt to make his master believe that the other dog began the quarrel. For my part, I would have the right dog whipped, without favour, whoever the master be that owneth him."

For a moment the King looked frowningly at the Primate, and his eyes blazed in a way that boded a sudden change to storm; but the next, he laughed good-humouredly, and merely said—

"Your Grace ever chooseth strange comparisons. Thou meanest, then, to throw doubt on this account Sir Eustace bringeth us?"

"His Grace is free to doubt me as he pleaseth, my liege,"

exclaimed Sir Eustace, with an angry glance at the Archbishop. "He knows that he is beyond my poor weapons, and that I cannot call a Churchman to account for what he says of me."

"When I was a soldier, Sir Knight, thy weapons would not have frightened me," rejoined Becket calmly. "But I doubt not thy word in this matter. I would only, as is fair and lawful in every question between faulty men, hear the other side of the argument, that so we may judge the dispute justly."

Sir Eustace was about to make a further retort, but the King checked him, saying—

"Nay, good Sir Eustace, no more words on it. Thou art better with thy lance than with thy tongue, and thou art no match for his Grace of Canterbury. But what says our worthy Marshal of the lists?" he added, turning to Sir Edmund Dunstan, who had been listening to the debate with an expression that showed the interest he took in it. "Thou art older and wiser than this hot Champion of ours, and fit to give counsel to the best of us."

"Plainly then, my liege," answered Sir Edmund, doffing his cap and bending his head respectfully to the King, "Sir Eustace is in the wrong as to this accident. I chance to know—though your Grace will excuse me from giving names, as a lady is concerned in the adventure—that Sir Wilfrid Alderic behaved rudely to an honourable damsel; and that the monk, who went to her assistance, not only struck Sir Wilfrid in all fairness, but in self-defence also, after the Knight had drawn sword on him and threatened him. I am as much Sir

Wilfrid's friend as Sir Eustace here, and I was his father's before that," continued the old Knight with quiet dignity; "but if he were my own son, and I spoke truth of him, I must needs say he deserved the punishment he got, for it ill-becometh a knight and your Grace's servant to do what he hath done in this matter."

"Your Grace's dog was in the right, after all," said the King, with a meaning glance at the Primate, "and 'tis our cur that hath earned the whipping—ay, and we mean to give it him!" he broke off with an angry frown. "This Sir Wilfrid Alderic shall serve no longer at court of ours—no, nor any knight living, be he the best in this Kingdom, that forgetteth the fair courtesy due to women! And thou, Sir Knight," he went on somewhat sternly to Sir Eustace, "take heed that thou gettest thy gossip proved ere thou meddlest again with the honour of thy fellow lieges. Nay, look not so glum, man. Thou hast done deeds enough this day to make thee glad with it, and we shall hold thee no worse for thy tongue's tripping. —Now the Devil or St. Dunstan bury this bone for us!"

Fate, however, proposed not that the bone, or at least one end of it, should be so soon hid under ground as the King in his good pleasure was disposed to have it; for at this moment a herald advanced towards the royal station, followed at a little distance by a knight in full armour, and whispered some words in the ear of Sir Edmund Dunstan. The old Marshal appeared greatly startled by this message, and, turning round, regarded the strange knight with a troubled look; but presently recovering himself, he went up to the latter, and said in a low voice—

"Thou art worse than mad, but I will keep my promise and do what I can for thee, and God Himself must rule the rest."

Then, once more advancing before the royal dais, he said to the King—

"I am sorry to trouble your Grace with more wrangling, but this is a matter that goeth beyond my office. Yonder knight, my liege, would challenge Sir Eustace Devereux to mortal battle."

"Thou must have mistaken him, Sir Edmund," returned the King with a look of surprise; "but let him draw near and speak for himself." Then, as the strange knight was led forward by the herald, he added—"Answer us, Sir Stranger Knight. The jousts are wellnigh over, but if thou desirest to try thy fortune with stout Sir Eustace here, I doubt not he will consent to break a lance with thee. Read we not aright? Is not that what thou camest hither to crave of us?"

The Strange Knight replied not for a moment, but bending his knee before the King, saluted him in respectful silence. Presently rising, he made answer in a clear, ringing voice, that might be heard by all assembled—

"Not so, if it please your Grace to hear me. I have no horse, and I desire no tilting-match with that foul knave and false knight, Sir Eustace Devereux; but, with your Grace's leave, would even challenge him to mortal combat, on foot, and with our two swords: in witness whereof I now throw my gage to him, and I pray God and your Grace for justice and a fair field to try my right with him!"

When Sir Eustace (who had now dismounted, and was

leaning against the foot of the dais) heard the challenge of the Strange Knight and the language it was couched in, he started angrily, and, forgetting the presence of the King, with a fierce oath laid his hand upon his sword; but a gesture from the King restrained him, and he contented himself with glaring moodily at the gage at his feet until the royal will should be declared concerning it. On his side, the King earnestly scanned the stranger for a brief space, as though seeking to read his inmost soul and purpose, and then said—

"Thou speakest bold words, Sir Knight, and thy cause should be good to excuse such freedom. Thou knowest that our rules permit not these combats which thou now proposest, save in the most extreme causes, and where justice cannot otherwise be satisfied. What is thy present quarrel with Sir Eustace Devereux, that needeth so bloody a deciding? And by what name and title art thou known, Sir Knight? And what are thy place and standing in the roll of arms? Thou bearest no crest or motto upon thy shield, and we must know somewhat more of thee ere we admit thee or thy claim to a decision."

"I crave your Grace's clemency to excuse my name," answered the Stranger in a firm voice. "There are good reasons wherefore I cannot now disclose it, but I pray your Grace to believe that they are honourable. As for my cause against Sir Eustace Devereux," he went on in louder tones and with a bolder mien, "God and your Grace and the whole world may judge of the quarrel that is betwixt me and him. Before God and men, I accuse him of basely betraying the woman I loved—ay, and by so foul a treason, that, did your

Grace know of it, methinks not only would you give me leave to try this issue with him, but I question not your Grace would have the spurs struck from his unknightly heels, and his blotted scutcheon burned by the common hangman!"

Sir Eustace, to say truth, had in his time betrayed so many women, that he no sooner learned the nature of the charge against him than he began to believe in earnest that some lover or husband of one of them had thus suddenly appeared to demand vengeance for a former wrong. In the security of his great physical prowess, however, he doubted not to give this presumptuous challenger an easy lesson, and in any case he was of too brave a temper to shirk a quarrel. He therefore turned quickly to the King, and said—

"I pray your Grace to grant this nameless boaster the whipping he craveth at my hands. I am ready to meet him on foot as he desireth, and I care not what he calleth himself, nor what his title may be for doing battle with me. Body of mine, it is title enough that he hath said what he hath of me, and that his gage hath lain so long unanswered at my feet here!"

"But hath he spoken falsely of thee?" asked the King, with a doubtful look at Sir Eustace. "Faith, man, if he hath, thou wouldst do well to say so in the ears of all, for he hath not whispered what he had to say against thee."

"I neither deny nor acknowledge what he hath spoken of me, my liege," rejoined Sir Eustace haughtily. "I know not at what his charge hinteth; but I am ready, with your Grace's leave, to fight him on his own warrant, and—Mother of God! methinks a man can do no more than follow the lead his enemy showeth him."

The King again glanced somewhat darkly at Sir Eustace, and then beckoned to Sir Edmund Dunstan; who, handing his horse to one of the grooms, quickly obeyed the royal summons, and mounted the steps of the dais. When he had drawn near, the King said to him in a low voice, inaudible to those around—

"Dost thou know aught of this matter, worthy Sir Edmund? By our crown, the thing beginneth to look black, and we would fain have it cleared ere we give it judgment. Knowest thou this Strange Knight, and the nature of his quarrel with Sir Eustace Devereux?"

"I know, my liege," replied Sir Edmund, in as low a voice as the King's, "that this Knight hath good reasons for thus keeping his name a secret, and, moreover, for his demand to fight on foot; and I know, too, that the injury he hath received from Sir Eustace would almost stir a dead man's sword to rise up from the grave to strike at him. I will stake my honour, my liege, both for the cause and the good name of this strange challenger. But if I may make bold to ask a favour of your Grace," he added earnestly, "I would crave indulgence to speak no further of another's secret, and humbly pray that my word may be held bond enough for yonder Knight your Grace hath questioned me of."

"Thy word is bond enough, worthy Sir Edmund," answered the King, "and we will not ask thee to reveal more than thine honour is free to spare us: nevertheless, we love not to see our knights spill in these private feuds the blood that is better spent in their country's quarrels. However, thou hast satisfied us that this Strange Knight hath a just grievance, and he

speaketh frankly as a loyal man should, wherein, we own, our bold Sir Eustace doth not follow him." Then, in a louder voice, he said to those around him—"How say you, my lords and knights? This is a matter we confess our judgment hath some doubts upon. Shall we let these two wolves at each other's throats, or set them in parted cages till they have cooled a little? What thinkest thou, my lord Archbishop? Thou hast judged peace or war for us before to-day."

"I am for peace, my liege," returned Becket in a grave tone; "and, if I may presume to advise your Grace on this matter, I think your knights had better keep their blood and zeal for an occasion when your Grace may have fitter use for them."

"So we have just told Sir Edmund," said the King; "but it seems that this Strange Knight hath a just cause of quarrel, and hath, moreover, no other means of righting himself. We would not willingly do despite to any loyal subject of ours, nor would we screen our own Champion, if he be in the wrong, from an issue his own deeds have brought on him."

"For my part," said Hugh de Moreville, "I would pray your Grace to let them have their own way, and e'en settle the quarrel, as befits knights and gentlemen, with their good swords and their right arms. By our Lady, there will be worse blood between them, if they do not, than ever they will spill in a fair combat before your Grace here."

"I cry amen!" said William de Tracy, with a fierce look towards Sir Eustace. "I join with De Moreville, my liege, in praying that this Strange Knight have a fair field and your Grace's leave to prove the merit of the cause he pleadeth."

"His Grace of Canterbury," said Reginald Fitzurse, who had an ancient grudge against the Primate, "was not always so ardent a champion of Christian peace. Those who saw him at Toulouse would not have chosen his Grace as one likely to hinder knights in a fair contest for life and honour!"

Becket deigned not even a look in reply to this sarcasm, but the King said sharply—

"Peace, Reginald: thou forgettest of whom thou pratest! His Grace is as much above thee as thou art above a dunghill." Then, turning to the Strange Knight, who had all this while been silently standing before the dais, awaiting the King's pleasure, he said—"Sir Stranger Knight, in God's name and thine own conscience, dost thou still maintain thy charge and challenge against that hitherto approved knight and present champion in these lists, Sir Eustace Devereux? We command thee to speak truly and without hindrance."

"In God's name, and of a pure conscience, my gracious liege," replied the Strange Knight, again bowing low to the King, "I do maintain that Sir Eustace Devereux is a false knight and unworthy to wear spurs; and, if he be not a coward as well as knave, I here defy him to disprove my challenge with his sword and the best valour that lieth in him!"

"A coward, God's rack on thee!" exclaimed Sir Eustace with a fierce oath, and half-springing towards his accuser, a movement which was at once checked by the interposing marshals—"God in Heaven, I will teach thee a lesson in knighthood thou shalt take with thee to another world, if his Grace will but give me the freedom!"

"Keep thyself quiet, Sir Eustace—we command thee," said the King with a stern look of reproval. "Thou forgettest our presence, and this bluster will not mend thy cause either with us or Heaven. Thou hast heard what this Strange Knight hath said of thee. Dost thou in our hearing, and in that of the higher Court thou hast appealed to, wish to deny the charge he hath brought against thee?"

"I have already said, my liege," answered Sir Eustace in a haughty tone, "that I care not either to deny or to acknowledge it. I know not the man who accuseth me, and it becomes not my worth to heed what a nameless braggart chooseth to say of me. But, by the Lord, what I can do I will do. I am ready to accept his challenge, and wait but your Grace's leave to pick up this gage of his, which hath lain here too long for my wounded honour—ay, and for my patience also!"

"In God's name, pick it up, then!" returned the King impatiently. "Ye shall have, both of you, this freedom ye crave for, and Heaven decide betwixt you, for, by our crown, we are tired of the argument. Good Sir Edmund, have the field cleared forthwith, and see that none interrupteth them; and we charge thee, let the matter be as soon settled as may be."

The news spread like wildfire among the assembled spectators that two knights were about to engage in battle *à outrance*, and the excitement was the keener since it was known that one of the combatants was no less renowned a warrior than the King's own Champion, the redoubtable victor of the day, and the other a strange knight who had challenged him—why

none could clearly tell, but speculation was agape over this mysterious stranger and his cause of quarrel. Crowds of the common people, who, deeming the day's pageant at an end, had begun to disperse, now returned in hot haste, and the galleries and enclosed spaces were thronged fuller than ever with knights and ladies; some of these last, our record hints, leaving their seats, and some feigning the desire to do so, when they learned the bloody nature of the feud, but the chief part choosing to stay, and even seeking better places, eager as the knights themselves to view the grim spectacle that was being prepared for them. Opinions, too, freely passed between the onlookers as to the merits and probable fortune of the two champions, but all tended to the same conclusion. The knights laughed loudly at the presumption of the unknown challenger in daring to cross blades with such a swordsman as Sir Eustace Devereux; and though not a few would have been glad to see the latter worsted, none had much doubt as to the issue. On their side, the ladies were moved with pity for the Stranger Knight, the more so as it was whispered that he had come to fight for the honour of a woman; and therefore many prayers went up for him from gentle lips—which, had he but known of them, might have helped him in his sore struggle; and most of all, those that were offered by a fair young girl in the Marshals' gallery, who, albeit she was of a tender spirit and one loathing rough sights, remained, like the others, to witness the encounter—with pale face, indeed, and nerveless, quaking limbs, but none the less with eyes fixed full and fervently on the scene of the expected battle.

Sir Edmund Dunstan and his fellow marshals had lost no time in carrying out the King's commands, and it was not long before the two combatants were engaged in the deadly strife which, after the belief of the age, was to decide the truth or falsehood of the one or the other. Nor had the conflict gone far ere the wind of opinion—the contempt of the male critics and the tremors of the female ones—began to veer and change, and it was owned, and withal much wondered at, that never before had Sir Eustace met a foeman who had put his boasted prowess to such proof. The Strange Knight, indeed, was evidently no novice. The burly Champion, do what he might—and he was in no temper to trifle—could make little impression on his unknown adversary, and loud plaudits greeted the latter for his perfect defence and the coolness with which he met the storm of blows and thrusts of his dangerous rival, to which as yet he had made no reply save by skilfully and actively warding them. The King himself, who for some reason seemed rather to take the part of the Stranger than that of his own Champion, was among the most zealous of the applauders. Turning to the Archbishop, he said eagerly—

"What thinks your Grace of this Strange Champion? Wouldst thou not choose to have him in thy train, my lord Primate? By our crown, we shall forestall your Grace in the election, for we must have him for a knight of ours, if we have to carry him *sans* consent to our royal keeping. He is every inch a man—thinkest thou not so, my lord Archbishop?"

"Truly, my liege, he is a proper man," answered Becket, whose martial temper was always stirred by the sight of a

contest, "and methinks he must have a good cause at the back of him.—Ha!" he added suddenly, "that was a good thrust well turned, though God wotteth I forget my sacred office by taking heed of it. But what means the man by letting his chance pass in this fashion? As I live, he had the Knight at his mercy, and he standeth like a stock to let him fetch again!"

"Mother of God! Is he playing with him?" cried the King in an equally surprised tone. "Why, he had him like a naked man, and, as thou sayest, he hath treated him like a novice at a fencing-bout!"

A buzz of astonishment had indeed gone the round of the whole assembly, for the unknown challenger, after so skilfully turning a thrust of his adversary as to leave the Knight plainly open to him, had apparently disdained to take advantage of his good fortune, and quietly left his enemy to recover himself. Even Sir Eustace, despite his rage at this proof of superior prowess, seemed struck with his rival's strange forbearance, for he stood still a moment, and said to him—

"Thou art more courteous in thine acts than in thy speech, Sir Stranger Knight. I thank thee for thy forbearance: nevertheless, it ill becometh me to receive favours at thy hand; and I warn thee, after what thou hast spoken of me, that I am not like to show thee as much kindness in return."

"I ask thee for no favour, and thou art welcome to work thy worst on me," replied the Strange Knight sternly. "I have but fulfilled the promise which I made to thee. I told thee that I would give thee a lesson in return for thine, and,

by our Lady in Heaven, I will keep my oath ere we part company!"

"So thou art that cursed monk I met at Sir Edmund Dunstan's—by the mass, I might have known as much!" exclaimed Sir Eustace in a voice so choked with passion as to be scarce audible. "Thou hast done well to keep thy tryst, and I will give thee a lesson this time which thou mayst take home to thy master the Devil, who I doubt not hath schooled thee in these tricks of thine!—Stand to thy ward, man, and play thy best," he added, suddenly raising his sword to strike, "for, be thou monk or devil, I mean to kill thee!"

The next moment it seemed likely that old Redwald's warning would have fulfilment; for, gathering all his force into one tremendous effort, Sir Eustace dealt his opponent a blow which fairly broke through the latter's guard, and, striking him full on the casque, caused him to stagger and half drop upon his knee. A low murmur of horror and pity, mingled with loud cries of—"God shield him!" "Spare him as he spared thee!" "The King's grace for him!" ran round the excited throng at this threatened catastrophe; and in particular, a deep voice might have been heard calling above the din, had any one had leisure to heed it—"The trick, the trick, Master Cuthbert! Thou didst promise not to forget it!" but even while his sympathizers were thus shouting, or rather in the very instant of their friendly alarm, the Strange Knight had nimbly sprung backward, and so avoided a second blow from his heavy antagonist; and, ere the onlookers had recovered their composure, the two champions were once more engaged in equal combat.

The struggle that followed was but brief. The unknown challenger had learned a lesson from his late peril, and whether or no he had heard the friendly hint just shouted to him, he was not slow in putting its precept to proof. Dropping his previous tactics of mere defence, he now promptly assailed Sir Eustace; and his superior skill, backed by a force and activity that fully balanced the ponderous strength of his enemy, was soon made evident to those who watched him. In a shorter time, then, than the telling takes, the Strange Knight attacked and bore back his angry opponent, and, quickly turning the latter's sword by a movement as sudden as it was adroit, drove his own weapon through the hauberk of Sir Eustace with a force and precision that would have satisfied even the critical eye of the old soldier who claimed the merit of the manœuvre. For a moment Sir Eustace staggered uncertainly, and the sword dropped from his hand; and then, with a deep groan, he fell heavily backwards upon the sward. As he did so, he turned a questioning look at his victorious adversary, and presently, in gasping tones, said—

"In the name of God, who art thou? I knew not there was a man living who could have done to me what thou hast done. Art thou a man truly, or the Devil himself come to punish me for my past trippings?"

The Strange Knight bent over his fallen enemy, and in a low, stern voice, in which justice had taken the place of vengeance, made answer to him—

"I am Cuthbert Alderic, the son of the woman thou betrayedst, and of the man thou calledst thy friend. If thou wouldst even now make amends before thou diest, I charge

thee to proclaim aloud my mother's truth and the wrong thou didst her."

The dying man stared fixedly at his conqueror for some moments, and then murmured—

"I might have known it—thou art like her, thou art like her! Edith was in the right—yet I am glad it is by thy hand." Then he added—"Send for a herald quickly, and I will do what thou desirest. Be speedy, I pray thee, for but a short grace is left to me."

As the young victor rose to perform this errand, he beheld a crowd of heralds, pursuivants, and other officials of the lists, who had drawn near to the scene of the encounter, and among them the chief marshal, Sir Edmund Dunstan, to whom he hastily explained his mission. Ordering the officers to withdraw, the old Marshal himself received the instructions of the dying Knight; after which, returning to the royal dais, and having obtained permission of the King, he proclaimed in a loud voice, so that all present might hear him—

"My liege, I am desired by that renowned Knight, Sir Eustace Devereux, who believeth himself to be dying, to ask forgiveness of all men for any wrongs he may have done them; and he desireth more particularly to make open confession of the foul slander he formerly wrought on the good name of the Lady Eleanor Alderic, whom he now owneth to have been guiltless of the charge he made against her, the which he confesseth he alone devised and compassed for his own evil ends; and he humbly prayeth your Grace to take means to clear the fame of this injured lady, and God and her relatives (if there be any) to pardon him for the great wrong which he did to her."

Sir Edmund's deep voice reached even to the dying Knight and his late antagonist. A stern look of joy lighted the eyes of the latter as he listened to the words which at last vindicated his mother's fame; and, as he knelt there by the side of his fallen enemy, he breathed thanks to God for the help which he believed had been vouchsafed to him. His reflections, however, were soon interrupted by the stricken man saying to him—

"Art thou a priest? If so, I would fain charge thee with the hearing of my sins. Methinks their pardon will come apter from thee than from another."

"I will send thee one—there is one waiting for me close at hand," replied his companion hastily. "I will go and find him for thee this instant."

So saying, the pretended knight passed speedily through the crowd, first informing the officers of his errand, and soon gained the skirts of the forest. There he found the object of his quest, the monk Clement, to whom he said hurriedly—

"Go quickly, Clement, to the wounded knight, Sir Eustace Devereux, who would make confession ere he dieth; and when thou hast done all that thou mayst for him, meet me at the place we lately agreed on, and do not fail me as thou hast grace in thee."

Then the Strange Champion ran as never knight ran before in armour, on and on through the mazy woods, nor stopped until he had reached that same secret glade described in a previous chapter, where he quickly doffed his knightly harness, and in its stead donned a plain monk's vestment, and hid away the former in the long fern-fronds; whence, a little later,

when the night had fallen, it was taken by the discreet hands of old Redwald, and committed to the keeping of silence and the grave's forgetfulness; in whose charge it remained some time, and might have so done for ever—save for one thing alone, which no man, but only God Himself, has power to contend against.

In the surprise and excitement caused by the proclamation of Sir Edmund Dunstan, the Strange Knight's disappearance had escaped the notice of the King and the chief personages who were with him; but that announcement had not long ended when the King said—

"We are right glad that a noble lady's name hath been thus cleared of the stain which hath too long lain upon it. We have lost a good knight in Sir Eustace Devereux, but by his own confessing he deserved his death, and had we known the nature of his offence, he had never found place in our service." Then he added—"Let the Strange Champion come hither to receive our greeting, for he hath borne himself as stoutly in this quarrel as the best knight we ever looked on, and we would fain tell him so with our own lips. By our crown, though," he went on after a pause, "it would seem that he is as modest as he is gallant, for we perceive him no longer in the lists. Good Sir Edmund, thou art warrant for him: dost thou know what hath become of this strange challenger?"

The worthy Marshal was put into some confusion by this question, and was wondering how he might frame an answer for his own and the King's contentment, when a fresh cause of distraction came suddenly to his relief. This was none other than the apparition—for she indeed looked like one—of the

unhappy Mistress Edith, who, forcing her way past the astonished officers, ran wildly into the lists, and paused not till she had reached the prostrate form of her stricken Knight. Here she stood awhile, gazing with fixed, tearless eyes at the well-known object at her feet—the proud face and stalwart limbs that once made the boldest to shrink back, which now the weakest or meanest might spurn or spite with impunity. Yet not quite with impunity; for as Edith stood there, mute and motionless though she was, there were moments when she more resembled an enraged lioness scanning the plain for her cubs' murderers than a grief-stricken woman widowed of all she held dearest and loved best. Clement, kneeling beside the fallen man, truly thought that she was frenzied. Had she only wept, or shrieked, or wrung her hands, railed at Earth or called on Heaven—done any one of the thousand acts that betoken common human grief and a common woman's weakness, the young monk could have understood it. But Clement was not very familiar with women, and this speechless, gestureless, seemingly passionless, affliction was beyond his experience; and therefore, though the cloud-craped presence before him appeared terrible enough to his fancy, and he felt that some stern sorrow must lie behind it, he deemed the woman mad. Nevertheless, the pale, fateful face, and death-staring eyes, and the monumental beauty (that once living, lissom, laughing beauty—now nought but marbled mourning!) which looked down on, or rather past, himself and the object he watched over, moved his pity alike as priest and man, and he essayed to break the spell and speak to her, the more so as he could no longer bear the haunting of this grim figure of grief, that

seemed scarce to stand on mortal ground, and to have nothing left of life save the shadow.

"Lady," he said, in the gentle, winning tones which strange comforters use when they know not well what to say or do, "what thou lookest on is beyond thy mortal help or thy mortal ruth, but not beyond thy prayers. Kneel, my sister, and let us pray together for his soul, that God and our Blessed Jesus may have mercy on him, and that our Lady and the holy angels may intercede for him."

Whatever else it lacked, the monk's voice served to break the ice of Mistress Edith's frozen mood, for she looked quickly at him, and said sternly—

"He wanteth not thy prayers, Sir Monk, and neither do I. But for thee and thy cursed kind he would not be lying thus, spoiled of all that made him glorious and the world proud of him. I will have none of thy knavish tricks to vex his soul which thou hast driven out of his body. I charge thee but to begone, and let us alone to what comfort thou hast left us."

Mistress Edith's wish, however, was not destined to be gratified, nor had Clement time to reflect on the mysterious words she had spoken to him; for at that moment the King, anxious to learn the cause of this strange incident, and also to offer comfort to the fair mourner, approached the scene of sorrow, followed by Sir Edmund Dunstan and the other personages that had been with him. Turning to the old Marshal, the King inquired in a low voice who the distressed lady might be, and what was her relation to the late Knight; but before Sir Edmund could reply, Richard Brito, who had overheard the question, answered coarsely—

"She is the late Champion's leman, my liege, and hath followed him, so 'tis rumoured, nigh these twenty years. 'Tis well known to the neighbours and the common folk here."

Mistress Edith at these words turned so fiercely upon the speaker that in spite of his assurance he recoiled from the glance which she bent on him.

"Thou liest, Sir Knight!" she cried in a clear, ringing voice; "and if thou dost not, thou art a shameless knave to speak thus in the face of death and sorrow! I know well, thou base coward, thou wouldst not have dared to say a word of me, good or evil, had my Knight been alive to give thee answer!"

This speech seemed to touch the King's sympathy, for he looked angrily at Brito, and in a stern voice said to him—

"Methinks, Sir Richard Brito, thou hadst best return to thy lodging and school thyself in knightly manners." Then, when the offending knight had withdrawn, he said courteously to Mistress Edith—

"We pray thee, gentle lady, pay no heed to what this rude clown spake of thee; and we entreat thee to believe that there is none here that thinketh any ill of thee, or that would not give his best to do thee kindness. We are sore grieved for thy sorrow, lady, and would gladly show thee any comfort that lieth in our power."

"Thou canst not give me back the life that hath been taken," replied Mistress Edith coldly, "and I ask no pity from thee or from any man." Then she added—"I will thank thy courtesy, if thou wilt have him carried to his own house with the reverence that befitteth so brave a knight; for I

would fain mourn over him in secret, nor shame him by shedding tears before his enemies."

Without taking any notice of the bereaved lady's haughty tone to him, the King gave the desired command, and in a short while a litter was prepared, and the body of the dead Knight placed upon it. Just, however, as the mournful cortège was about to set forth, Edith ran to the side of the litter, and, taking up the fallen Champion's sword, exclaimed in a loud voice, as she solemnly kissed it—

"Thou hast been foully done to death, my Knight, but, by God Who ruleth us, I swear on this good blade of thine to avenge thee! I swear to thee I will find this traitor, this blasphemer, this perjured champion of Heaven, that hath robbed thy life and despoiled thine honour; and his blood shall be for thy blood, his honour for thy honour, his happiness for our happiness!—Alas, my Knight!" she went on, in lower tones and with a more broken utterance, "Thou didst go from me in wrath, thy last words to me were in anger; but thou wilt smile on me when I have done this deed for thee, and I *will* do it; for henceforth I will live only to keep my vow to thee, and I will not join thee in thy dark sleep till I have accomplished it!"

Then Mistress Edith laid the sword down again by the Knight's side, and motioned the bearers to go on; and presently, in slow procession—as strange and pitiful a one as ever the old oaks had looked upon and chronicled—the little company moved on through, and were gently gathered up and lost to view in, the still depths of the glowing forest; wherein Nature, which must either be without pity or else

better informed, was smiling as though nothing particular had happened, or even as though it were a thing to be glad of.

Tradition, our record tells us, long afterwards whispered, and maybe still whispers somewhere, that the close of that fair Autumn day was suddenly clouded by a dark shadow of pall-like gloom, unnatural and mysterious enough to fill the hearts of men with dread; so that the younger ones pointed to and wondered at it, and the elders shook their heads over it, and with trembling lips and bated breath discerned the presence of God's finger in it.

BOOK II

THE SHADOW OF THE PRESENT

CHAPTER I

A SERMON ON SHEEPSKIN

But for pity of my readers, if I have any, and the desire to practise self-restraint, I could moralize my heart's-full over these old memorials into whose dark subsoil I am digging to get at the roots of this history. In the faded writing that looms out, like lights in a fog, from the yellow, crackled sheets, there is a strange kind of immortality, a sort of posthumous life; shared also, in a less degree, by the skin of the poor animal who has long since been hid away under the earth he once walked on—all but this small part of him, which he little thought would survive, and become more important than, the belly it so delighted him to honour. And the man—the living, laughing, weeping, prating, praying, I fear not marrying, man—who wrote these same records of a storm-tossed, wave-driven brother—where is he now? What is he doing, and how fares it with him all this while? In what part of great Universe, in what hidden nook of Infinitude,

or on what least foothold of projecting Futurity, is he at present resting? Surely somewhere there must be a quiet corner for this peaceful soul, who in his cold cell of this world so long sat patiently over the scroll of his friend and brother; and who when absent from it, I do believe, did never an ill deed either against himself or against living creature! That friend, too—if we are right in our conjecture—of whom he wrote, the hero and soul of his strange history, the inspirer, the ink almost, of his plodding pen—what of *him?* Where is *he* fled to? What fresh deeds has he to compass? What more glory to lose or gain? What joy or sorrow to get or give? What passion left for new rights or for old wrongs? Sail the two ships—which once consorted in these narrow seas—in the same track, within cheery hail of one another, of that greater Ocean they are now chartered to make voyage in? Is there no pilot, returning to our river here, who can bring good tidings—nay, any tidings—of him? Some outward-bound captain, who may shout through his storm-trumpet to one touching homeward—that the lost ship has been spoken, that it is still, though haply a trifle damaged, buffeting the winds and ploughing the dark waves in its course towards that haven on the other side? If not, then let some herald of Mercy and Morning, standing high over both Earth and Ocean, and seeing all at a single bright glance, whisper down to the sentinel that leans against the grey gate of Dawn, the wan water-wicket where the boats are moored and the trembling passengers are waiting to be ferried; who will echo on the message to us, and send it bounding past the mists of

Night, waking with its wings all the song and sunlight of the sleeping World—the glad message that "all is well!"

Truly, in looking at these faded memorials, the very ink seems to become alive and to take shapes to itself—not ghosts merely, but the bodily forms, the kindling spirits, of the men and things it discourses of. The Past unfolds its limbered coils: it is a past no more: a strong light floods it, a clear prism bends it, and all its bravery and blazoning are made visible: it is alive again, or was never dead, and is peopled with deeds and doers just like this Present—the impatient heir who has put it away while yet breathing, and then supplanted it.

This saucy Present, forsooth! who stands over his ancestor's tomb, or lightly sits astride of it, and fancies himself the sole heir of Time, the pet child of Immortality, and gives scarce a loose kick of a thought to the prostrate glory that lies beneath him! Ye Heavens, if that mute mouth could speak, if those marbled limbs could move, if that fixed mace could but rise up and deal a ghost of one of its old buffets—what a drubbing the young parvenu would get, and how I, for one, should laugh to see him taking it!

Anyway, I myself, poring over these records of a past time and past people, cannot believe in the decease of either the one or the other. The deeds, methinks, which made so great a shock *then*, must still vibrate somewhere in the great heart of Universe: the voices, that once so loudly sounded, surely echo yet in some far corner of the trembling welkin! The souls—whereof, truly, the deeds are but the voice—where bustle they now? So restless once, stir they not still

somewhere? In all the unploughed ocean of Infinitude is there no tenantless island where fit work may be found for them? If not here, then in some other sphere—one cares not where, so that it be *anywhere*—some colony for brave hearts and glorious deeds—nay, for the inglorious and ignoble, also, that may become nobler by meet discipline and directed toil; for there is room for all: the field of Eternity is boundless; of which the Future is the harvest, the Present the gathering of the labourers.

Meantime, our perplexed World, which is growing old and a little weary, shakes its heavy head—whereon the grey hairs, which one fancies are the evil deeds, are thickly sprinkled—and, like an elderly man who has outgrown the fashions of his youth, knows not well what to think; but on the whole concludes that it will roll on after its old shuffling mode, beam ends awry, or anyways most convenient, until a wiser head than its own shall decide its future motions for it; in which judgment we concur, and—but for our respect for the worthy senior's age, and for some few merits that go along with it—would fain pat the old fellow on the back, in hearty sense of our approval.

And this reflection brings another. Still conning these old memorials, I am reminded that our World is often likened to a stage, and we poor mortals to the players. Is it not rather a rehearsal, in which the actors do not always find their parts?

CHAPTER II

THE SWELL AFTER THE STORM

Sir Wilfrid Alderic (who we find was now pretty well recovered from his hurt and subsequent relapse), being deprived on the afternoon of the tournament of his usual attendant Clement, was supplied for that occasion with a nurse more to his mind than any he had yet had—to wit, the jolly priest Father Hubert. Whether the worthy Prior, discerning the worldly temper of his patient, and despairing of making any impression on it by better instruments, had, in a moment of lingering humour or zeal for art, thought fit to match the Devil with the most ungodly churchman he possessed, or whether it was a mere accident of convenience, we have no means of discovering—anyway, it so fell; and Father Hubert, as he was commonly called, more in deference to his years than his sanctity, betook his portly presence to the sick man's chamber. The Knight, who was no longer kept to bed, but now sat up in one of the easy-chairs of the period, a straight-backed, stout-armed oaken one, was in that irritable state which often accompanies convalescence—at least, in the case of a strong man anxious to stretch his limbs and be again in the world he has been jostled out of. Expecting to see the grave face of Clement, he was proportionately prepared to give his spleen a free rein, and to be no pleasanter than the barest show of gratitude demanded; but the beaming countenance of the jolly monk, supported by the cumbrous

plinth of his buxom body, instantly changed the Knight's mood into one of good-humour, and for the first time since his imprisonment in the Priory he felt a hearty desire to laugh. This humour so seized him that, without waiting for his jovial visitor to announce himself, he held out both his hands to him, and cried lustily—

"Welcome, holy Father—I am sure thou art holy by the looks of thee! Body of man, thou art the morning sun himself come to cheer the Earth with his blithe beaming! I warrant we shall be good company. Thou art the only member of thy confraternity that hath ever put his nose in at the door without chilling the air into icicles. I will be sworn thine will not! But how art thou called, Reverend Father? As we shall be good friends—that I am assured of, for I like the first glimpse of thee mightily—we had best become acquainted at the starting."

"I am only a poor priest, and I am known among the Brethren as Father Hubert," replied the monk with a solemn gravity that was oddly contradicted by the merry twinkling of his eyes—a habit which had much annoyed the good Prior and the more serious Brethren, but which, nevertheless, no one could call him to account for, insomuch as, twinkle as his eyes might, no muscle of his face beside, nor a single word from his mouth, ever gave the least support—at all events, in the above select company—to those offending organs, and it is hardly possible to hold a man responsible for a natural expression of his eyes. The latter, indeed, to compare very small things with very great ones, somewhat resembled the stars at night—the darker the sky the brighter they twinkled, and the

severest moralist would not dream of accusing stars of levity.

"Thou dost not do thyself justice, Reverend Father," returned the Knight, laughing in spite of his attempt to copy the monk's gravity. "Thou art too thin—I am sure thou fastest too much. By the mass, mortification was never meant for so fine a body as thine!"

"I am not the disposer of it, worthy son," answered the ecclesiastic modestly. "Maybe thou art right; but it becometh us to bend our carnal appetites, and not to yield too readily to the promptings of our grosser nature."

"If thou talkest like that," said the Knight, "I shall hold thee no better than thy ghostly-faced brethren they have hitherto sent here to scare me—save, indeed, that I believe not thou meanest a word of what thou sayest. I presume, Reverend Father, thou canst yield on meet occasion to that same grosser nature thou speakest of?"

"It may be," replied Father Hubert doubtfully, "on fit occasion, my son, and with one to absolve me afterwards, if I tripped unawares into an accident; but truly, my son, it is better to avoid tripping than to mend the leg after it hath become broken."

"And I presume, also," said the Knight, taking up the illustration, "if none knew of the accident save thyself alone, it would not be difficult with thy skill and learning, being, as one may say, in constant practice, to mend thine own leg thyself, and leave the world—that is, thy brethren here—to be as wise as they had a mind to be?"

"It might be," again answered the monk doubtfully; "but

indeed, my son, these are matters that a poor Brother knoweth little of. If thou askest me, now, concerning matins, or compline, or——"

"The Devil take me, if I do!" exclaimed Sir Wilfrid impatiently, "and thee also, if thou answerest me! I see thou art afraid of me, Reverend Father. Faith, thou hast no need; and, if we are to be friends truly, thou hadst best dismiss that thought from thee without blinking. I tell thee thou mayst get drunk, if thou hast a mind to, and dance in thy bare shirt and breeches, and the holy Prior will be no wiser for my prating. In plain truth, Father, I like thy looks, and I want thee to make my time merry here, and when I leave this cursed prison thou shalt drink as many good flagons at my house yonder as thou pleasest; but for God's sake, man, put off that pious mask of thine, which I wot fits thy jolly face badly, and reminds me horribly of thy spiritual betters. I vow thy wearing it is a double sacrilege, for it cannot make thee—what thou wilt never be—a good monk, and it spoils thee from being—what thou mightest be—a pleasant fellow."

As the burly monk listened to the above speech his face became still graver, but his eyes twinkled so rapidly in his head that, had they been the stars we lately compared them with, one would have thought they were about to fall from their place in the heaven—in this case the fat cheeks—which encompassed them. Sir Wilfrid, who seemed much tickled at the sight, after looking for some time at his companion with an amused air of wonder, fairly rolled on his chair with laughter; in which, finally, the Reverend Father joined him, and the two gave vent to an explosion of jolly merriment such as that

demure and astonished little cell had never before heard the like of. This outburst was presently broken by the monk putting up his finger in a warning way, and saying—

"Hush, my son! The Prior will overhear us, and I shall be no longer suffered to remain with thee."

"And thou wilt have to do penance, which will probably be fasting," returned Sir Wilfrid, again laughing. The monk made a wry face for answer, and then the Knight added—"I see thou art in thy right mind now, Reverend Father; and talking of fasting, have ye anything better than watered Gascoigny in this house of thine? 'Tis thirsty work jesting, and we might do worse than try the taste of some."

"There is some passable sack in the buttery," responded Father Hubert, with just the hint of a wink in one of his eyes, "and if the Prior is out, I doubt not the Cellarer will let me have a flagon. I will go, my son, and take a look at the enemy's country."

Father Hubert's mission was seemingly successful in both respects, for he shortly reappeared with a good-sized flagon and a pair of cups, which he laid down triumphantly in front of his companion, a brilliant constellation of twinkles accompanying the action. Before settling down to pleasure, however, the prudent priest had a thought for business, and took the precaution of securely bolting the door, saying solemnly to the Knight as he did so—

"If any one cometh suddenly, my son, I can say that thou wast engaged at thy prayers, and didst not wish to be disturbed in them."

"Faith, Reverend Father, thou hast doffed thy mask

properly!" replied the Knight with a loud laugh. "Here's to thee without it!" he went on, pouring out a cupful of the wine and drinking to his companion. "Truly, my rising sun, my buxom priest, my king of jolly monks and only good fellow among the whole canting herd of them—I like thee better with that free face of thine than ever I did with the shrewish cloud thou wast at first minded to have it hidden in! Here's to thy health; and may thy body never grow thinner, nor the Prior make thee fast any oftener than is convenient to thee!"

The monk pledged the Knight as heartily in return, coupling the draught with the rather unecclesiastical wish that his toast might soon be on his legs and in his armour again.

"Pest! that remindeth me," said Sir Wilfrid testily, "of my present cursed luck, shut up here like a caged beast, while all my friends, and some of my enemies, are doing valiance before the King and his fair Court yonder. Plague take my—the meddling fool that broke my head, and the light-locked minx that was the cause of it! A pretty thing, if the King should ask for me, to have it told that his knight was knocked on the head by a shaved monk, and over a yellow-haired chit of a country damsel!"

"If report lie not," answered Father Hubert consolingly, "his Grace himself hath had some comfort of a yellow-haired damsel; so he will both feel for thee, and be pleased that thou hast had the taste to copy him."

"By the Rood, will he!" rejoined the Knight, shrugging his shoulders. "I tell thee, like all kings, he judgeth not his subjects by himself, and the fair Clifford will not serve as an

excuse—no, faith, but rather the contrary—for any lesser man's tripping. Thou knowest that what is right for the master may be wrong for the servant, and that a judge most condemns the ground he hath himself slipped on—partly because he is most familiar with it, and partly that it stands him, like royal whippings, for a kind of penance by proxy."

"Thou art of opinion, then," said the monk with a sly glance at his companion, "that if thy Rosamond remindeth the King of his Rosamond, the resemblance will not be to thine advantage?"

"What meanest thou?" asked Sir Wilfrid sharply. "Mass, man, art thou jesting, or knowest thou who this lady is that I met in yonder forest? If thou dost, I will make it worth thy while to acquaint me with her name and standing."

"Her name," replied Father Hubert deliberately, "is Rosamond—'fair Mistress Rosamond' some folks call her; and for standing, she is the daughter of Sir Edmund Dunstan, the King's Marshal of the lists in the present tournament. If I err not, he is a neighbour of thine, Sir Knight, and doubtless thou hast heard speak of him," added the monk, with a roguish look of amusement at the dismay his news had caused his questioner.

This news certainly produced a strong effect upon the Knight, and he received it with an expression of troubled surprise not often seen on his cynical features.

"The devil!" he exclaimed in a perplexed tone. "I have certainly been fishing in the wrong pond, and the Fiend himself must have cast the net for me!—Death, man, thou needst not wink at me with those wolf's eyes of thine!" he

went on irritably. "I am well enough aware that I have got my foot into a quagmire, and thy blinking will not show me the way out of it. If thou hast any wit in thee, tell me what thou wouldst do in my plight, and if thou canst see any straight track to dry ground again; or if not a straight, then a crooked one—a lie, if thou canst find nothing better, or it shock thee not too greatly—anything that may help me out of this plaguy hole I have got my feet into."

"A lie," answered Father Hubert philosophically, "is only justified by its profit, and methinks in the present issue 'twould be but a sin without savour—that is, it would not help thy purpose, but rather hinder it, and therefore, my son, I cannot recommend it to thee. The straight track thou speakest of seemeth to me the better. I would go, my son, to this Sir Edmund Dunstan, who is, if I rightly mind me, an old friend of thine, and make the best apology thou canst devise for him, and for the lady, too. By that means thou wilt be received back into their favour, and their house also; and if thou likest the lady as well inside walls as thou didst out of them, why shouldst thou not contrive to wed her? which plan, methinks, would both satisfy thine own affection for her, and be the best apology thou couldst offer her for thy late offending."

"I see thou canst give counsel as well as drink wine," said Sir Wilfrid smiling, "and thou art as good with the one as the other. I like thy advice greatly, and when I leave this dull prison of mine I will put it into practice—ay, and thy second counsel, also. I see not, neither, why I should not wed this fair Mistress Rosamond, as thou callest her; though it

seemeth strange I have never met her until that cursed mischance of ours in the forest. I remember her as a child, and a pretty child she was; but after that I lost sight of her, and was not enough troubled by her absence to ask the cause of it."

"She hath but lately come back from Normandy, where she hath been long schooled; and that is why thou hast not seen her before the other day, when thou didst make thyself known to her—with the freedom of an old friend," replied the monk, his eyes twinkling so fast and giddily as to threaten a change of orbits if he did not presently put a check upon their license.

"The plague take our meeting and our old friendship!" said Sir Wilfrid moodily. Then he added—"And thou, my jolly guider of souls, thou appearest to be well acquainted with the affairs of this sinful world. I pray thee, how comest thou to know so much of thy neighbours' matters?"

"A shepherd," returned Father Hubert piously, "to be of good service, must know something of the flock he hath to watch over."

"I warrant thou art acquainted with the lambs in their proper season!" said the Knight laughing. "Whether thy merits as a shepherd go beyond that is a riddle might put our learned Prior to some guessing. However, it is not for a sheep to complain of the shepherd that brings good grass to him, and so long as I must needs play the one, I desire no better than thy worthy self for the other; so here's to thy health once more, my blithe Benedict! and I wish thou wouldst add to the cheer of thy company by singing a merry song to drive this cursed mischance out of my head. Thou

didst let it in there thyself, so 'tis partly thy priestly duty to get it out again. I am sure thou canst sing by the make of that full throat of thine, and thou hast a voice as deep-toned as the big bell at Evesham. Come, out with it, Reverend Father. I would broach my best butt of sack to hear thee sing a stave in this old dungeon of ours! Why, the very stones would join chorus for pleasant jest of the thing! Thou canst sing, canst thou not, my jolly shepherd?"

"Truly, I can sing a little," answered Father Hubert modestly; "but not here, my son. I like not the risk of it. We shall have the Prior, maybe, or——"

"Tush, man!" broke in the Knight impatiently. "A man of thy brawn and wits to be afraid of a weedy old hermit like the Prior of St. Giles! I'll warrant none of the Brethren will hear us through these thick walls, if thou crackest the very air betwixt them; and at the worst, thou hast but to add to that precious device of thine about the prayers, and say that thou wast singing a decent hymn to me."

"Nay, my son, but a song hath wings," replied the monk, with a deprecating motion of his eye that was half a wink half a twinkle, "and the Brethren, I promise thee, know the difference between an angel's feather and a plume of the Devil, as methinks our Prior would call every honest song that was not a psalm or an anthem. Some other time I will sing to thee, when we have fewer ears and more tune in them. Hast thou any liking for a hunting-song, Sir Knight? I remember a small fancy of one which an old huntsman that once lived here taught me—nay, not now, my son—not now. I would like well enough to do thy pleasure, but it

becometh us to be prudent, and the song is not worth the scandal."

The Knight, however, pressed; and Father Hubert, who had done his full share in the joint task of drying the flagon, and whose prudence—like a general secretly favouring a revolution, but making a decent show of resistance—had gradually yielded up its ground to the generous invader that demanded it, began to waver in his defence, and finally, clearing his throat, staved out the "small fancy" which he had promised for a future entertainment. This song, very freely rendered into modern English, ran somewhat as follows:—

Hunting Song

What ho! What ho! To horse we'll go,
To hunt the merry morning!
Our dogs run fast to hear our blast,
The eager quarry scorning!—
With a holloa on our horn
To wake the merry morn!

The birds we wake from every brake,
And echo send a-flying!
So swift we run, the ruddy sun
Is wroth at our defying!—
With a holloa on our horn
To wake the merry morn!

Away! away! Who lags? Who'd stay
A-napping or a-quaffing?
The merry beam shines on the stream,
And all the world is laughing!—
With a holloa on our horn
To wake the merry morn!

At first the jolly monk sang cautiously and in a constrained voice; but presently, carried away by the spirit of his song, and likely enough by the memories it awakened, and the Knight joining heartily in the refrain, the "hollo-a" of which was lengthened out in rude imitation of a falling echo, the pair made a fine clamour of it, and the arched roof resounded with the noise of their blended efforts—the very stones, as Sir Wilfrid had prophesied, seeming to be moved to laughter by the strange experience, or trying to take a part in the medley that was disturbing them.

It is notorious that the best-laid plans have commonly a hole left somewhere in them, and the present was no exception. Father Hubert, who had shown such thought in remembering the door, had quite forgotten about the window; and it happened that, in the very moment of the loudest chorus, with cups clinking and voices swelling to their fullest compass, the jolly monk's features suddenly became fixed as one that sees death or a spectre, the song and the laughter alike froze on his parted lips, and the cup fell from his lifted hand—to all appearance he had been seized by a fit, or else had incontinently grown sober, and in his case either of these conditions was alarming, either was a serious signal of warning. Sir Wilfrid at first thought that it was the former of the two contingencies; but turning round, and following the scared eyes of his companion, which had not even the ghost of a twinkle left in them, he beheld, and could scarce refrain from laughing out afresh at the sight, the grave face of the Prior himself pressed close against the window, and staring in sternly on the scene of the late festivity. The Knight, however, had

the decency to control his mirth, and only said to the frightened monk in a smothered voice—

"By the mass, we are trapped, my jolly shepherd! Prayers and hymns will not serve us now. Thou must say that one of the flock got caught in a bramble, and that——"

"For God's sake, do not jest, brother!" returned the monk in a helpless tone. "It may be mirth to thee, but for me—truly, it meaneth fastings and vigils which frighten me but to think upon; for I have not a constitution, brother, which beareth readily with them, nor, if our worthy Prior only knew it, a spirit that is anywise purified or made easier for Heaven by that manner of dealing with it.—I would the Devil or my father had never made a monk of me!"

The Knight leaned back in his chair, and laughed despite himself. "Take heart, man," he said, when at last he could command his voice. "Remember thy position. The shepherd should not be more frightened than his sheep, and thou seest that I am not even disturbed by this accident. Come, thou lookest as dull as the sun in a grey fog—thou, that wast so lately blazing in thy full zenith. Mass, man, take comfort. I will intercede for thee with the Prior, and maybe——"

Here the conversation was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door, a summons which the dismayed monk, greatly to the Knight's amusement, was perforce obliged to answer, and, much against his will, let into the room the dreaded presence of his indignant Superior. The good Prior was indeed white with anger, but he mastered himself sufficiently to say calmly, and withal coldly—

"This is an ill return, Sir Knight, for such small services

as we may have rendered thee, to turn God's house into a ribald singing-booth. And thou, my brother," he added, sternly addressing the delinquent monk, "how often have I had to tell thee that thou bringest shame on thine own soul and the sacred charge entrusted to thee! Truly, thou art a thorn in my very side, and it is such as thou that cause men to speakly lightly of our high calling, and to despise our blessed office. I would to Heaven that my lord had kept thee at Worcester, nor sent thee hither to spoil my fold with thy wolf's treason!"

Father Hubert, who probably judged by experience that silence profited him best on these occasions, made no answer beyond muttering something about being "overtaken unawares;" but Sir Wilfrid came to his rescue, as he had promised, by saying—

"Nay, Reverend Father, be not angry with the good Brother. I am alone to blame in this matter, as I urged him against his will to sing a song to me; and the song had no great harm in it, being only a simple hunting-ditty which his Grace of Canterbury might have joined in without hurt to his tender conscience. Nevertheless, I crave pardon both for myself and this reverend partner of my guilt, and will gladly, if thou wilt accept of it, make a fair offering for thy poor here, in token of our common penitence."

The Prior replied to this speech only by a slight inclination of the head, the interpretation of which to Father Hubert, who was carefully watching him, appeared doubtful; but presently the old man said in a gentler voice to Sir Wilfrid—

"I have just heard some news, my son, which methinks

will put thy thoughts into a more sober habit. It hath been even now told me that thou hast lost a valued friend, and one, I fear, who was little ready to change this present world for that he hath been so suddenly called to. It is said, my son, that Sir Eustace Devereux hath met his death at the royal tournament."

"Sir Eustace Devereux! Dead!" exclaimed Sir Wilfrid, all his levity flying before his astonishment. "By the mass, Reverend Father, 'tis not possible! Thy informant must have mistaken the man or the news. I know every knight that would be like to tilt there, and I know not one who could do this thing to Sir Eustace Devereux. I myself am reckoned as good a match for him as any man, whether it be with lance or sword, but I scruple not to own that he is my master, and that I could not stand up to him as I could with others. Besides," added the Knight with a sudden thought, "they do not play *à outrance* at these meetings, and 'twould take a tough mischance to kill Sir Eustace."

"Nevertheless, he is dead, my son," answered the Prior, "and by no mischance, as thou callest it, but in fair battle, fought under the King's own eyes, and with the King's full approval. The man who told me of it witnessed the whole matter, and saw the blow dealt which made an end of the poor knight who was smitten by it."

"In fair battle, and with the King's approval!" repeated Sir Wilfrid, looking still more amazed. "But, in the name of Heaven, what was the quarrel about, and who was the man that fought this bloody issue with Sir Eustace?—Holy Angels," he continued with unwonted fervour, "the cause must have

been a rare one to have made the King waive the rules, and consent to such a meeting at his tournament!"

"The cause and the man are both unknown," replied the Prior, "at least, they are not known to any save the King and his Marshal of the lists. It seemeth that a strange knight, whom no one recognised, challenged Sir Eustace to mortal battle, and after the combat was ended he disappeared, and none could tell whither he had betaken himself."

"Thou readest me a dream, Reverend Father," said Sir Wilfrid in a puzzled tone. "If thou hadst told me this of the King himself I could better have believed it than of Sir Eustace Devereux. I knew the Knight as well as I know any man, and though he had enemies enough, I wot of none that had a cause against him like this, or that would have dared to challenge him to so bloody a debate on it. By the Lord, though," he added suddenly, "there was one I had forgotten me of—yet, 'tis not possible—and yet, it might be—— Mother of God!" he exclaimed, starting hastily from his seat and turning to the surprised Prior, "may I be burned, Reverend Father, if I believe not that either the Devil or my pious brother hath wrought this same mischief we are talking of!"

It was now the Prior's turn to look astonished, if indeed that word at all expresses the effect which the Knight's speech produced on the old man's mind and body. For some moments he shook like a man in an ague-fit, and could only stare mutely at Sir Wilfrid with dilated eyes and an expression of mingled horror and pleading grief. At length he found his speech, and, grasping the Knight's arm with a force which none would have expected, said hoarsely—

"Say not that, my son—not that, for God's sake and our Blessed Lady's! I know that he is hasty and somewhat headstrong, and thy father's blood runneth over-hotly in his young veins; but I have loved him as my own child—ay, and I would rather die than believe this thing of him! But thou believest it not either, my son? I pray thee, answer me? Thou hast no proof save an idle fancy, and—I pray thee, my son, let us think no more of it."

"As thou pleasest, Father," returned Sir Wilfrid coldly, "but thou knowest as well as I do the cause he had against Sir Eustace; and indeed, in my late illness, I had but to mention the Knight's name to him to put my throat in peril of his saintly fingers."

"But it is not possible," answered the Prior steadfastly. "He knoweth not the cause thou hintest at; and how could a youth such as he, all his life ignorant of the use of arms, meet and overcome a knight like Sir Eustace Devereux, a trained soldier, and one whom, as thou sayest, the most valiant feared to encounter?"

"I cannot tell thee," retorted the Knight. "I give thee but a hazard of this riddle, I do not pretend to answer it. Our family are not noted for their peaceful tastes, and it may be that my pious brother—whom thou errest in thinking ignorant of his supposed grievance—knoweth more of arms than thou hast given him credit for. When he met me the other day in yonder forest, he boasted what he would have done with me had he but got a sword in his hand to school me with. However, I am not his keeper; and, as thou hast just said, very like my suspicion is an idle fancy."

"Thou lovest not thy brother, my son," replied the Prior, regarding Sir Wilfrid with a look of displeasure that almost savoured of scorn. "Yet, whatever be his faults, he is a noble youth, and it would better beseem thee to be his advocate than his accuser. I believe not that thy suggestion hath any ground to it; but were it otherwise, and saving his present office, methinks this cause, which thou sayest was known to him, is good enough to be some excuse for him. Not that I would excuse him, or any man either," he added quickly, "for taking vengeance into his own hands. Truly, vengeance is with God alone, and it is not for us to deal punishment for our private wrongs. But thou hast not these scruples, my son; and I should have thought that thou of all men wouldst have had fellowship with thy brother's cause—a cause which is thine own also, for it concerneth thine own father's honour."

"I know not that his honour was concerned in it—at least, not as regards Sir Eustace," rejoined the Knight sullenly. "My father did not think so, and, as I told my warlike brother in this room here, he was the best judge of his own wife's merits."

"Thou didst tell thy brother that?" said the Prior sternly. "Then I have misjudged his patience! But thou art in error, Sir Knight, in this unkind suspicion of thine—thy father *did* believe in his wife's innocence, as I, who received his last solemn assurance of the wrong he dealt her, can bear witness to; and thy friend Sir Eustace *was* guilty of the lie which robbed her of life and honour, as he himself hath just freely confessed before the King and all that were at the jousts with him."

A look of triumph, instead of the words of regret and perhaps penitence which the Prior had hoped for, came into the Knight's face at this announcement.

"By the Rood, Reverend Father," he said, "that looks very like a confirmation of my idle fancy, as thou callest it. This confession soundeth somewhat like an echo of the blow that went before it. I have lost a good friend in Sir Eustace; but my brother is a fencer our family may be proud of!"

"I believe not that he had any hand in it," answered the Prior warmly; "but I will question him when he returns, and if he hath so far forgotten his duty to God and us as thou hintest, assuredly he shall not escape the blame due to him—not if he were my own child truly, instead of the poor Knight thy father's, who, thou perchance knowest, gave him to my care at his mother's death, when the boy reminded him too keenly of that rash judgment."

"And if my 'hint' should prove aright," said Sir Wilfrid, "there will be a pretty kettle of fish for some of our frying. I have to thank my knightly brother for one favour already, and now another followeth on the heels of it. The King was never very enamoured of monks, and he will not love them any better for making an end of his favourite Champion—nor my family, either, that hath supplied the pious warrior who brought it to pass. Methinks, too, Reverend Father, thine own pans will need looking to as well as mine."

"Should the test come they will stand the trial, my son," replied the Prior quietly; "and for thyself, if what thou hintest at prove more than random guessing, it will be thine own fault should either the King or any one else become

acquainted with this matter. Thou forgettest that there are but three of us now living—or, it may be, one other—who are in the secret of thy brother's birth, and that none beside knoweth that the monk Bernard is the same as thy father's son Cuthbert Alderic. I knew not, even, that thy brother himself——"

At this moment, by some sense of intuition more common than explicable, the Prior became conscious of the presence of Father Hubert, whose very existence the distraction of the debate had driven clean out of his thoughts. Looking suddenly round, he saw the jolly monk's eyes fixed full and distended, and without a semblance of their wonted twinkle, upon himself and the Knight opposite. The latter, who had equally lost touch of the whilom companion of his mirth, although in better view of him than the Prior, became at the same instant aware of the massive receptacle into which they had been thus imprudently dropping their secrets; and as he did so, he cried out sharply—

"The Devil mend the mess we have got into!—I crave thy pardon, Reverend Father, but methinks between us we have added a fourth, or maybe, as thou sayest, a *fifth*, to the number of living guardians of this precious secret of ours—unless, indeed, thou wilt give me leave to follow my saintly brother's example, and let our jewel out of that fat casket there with my sword's-point. 'Twould be the surest way of getting it back again, for I doubt our ghostly eavesdropper is better at singing a song than holding a secret."

The Knight, who had sprung from his seat and half-drawn his sword, backed this speech with an air so fierce and

threatening that Father Hubert, among whose qualities personal courage was not worth reckoning, was really frightened; and he was about to explain, either that he had been asleep and had not heard a word of the conversation, or, judging perhaps that this shift might not pass muster, that he did not understand, and in any case would not repeat, a single sentence of all he had listened to—whatever else, to implore that no bodily harm should be done him—when the Prior cut him short, saying to Sir Wilfrid, "I will answer for his silence, Sir Knight: I have a string that will tie his tongue better than threats or promises." Then, taking the scared monk into a corner of the room, he whispered something in his ear which appeared to have the effect intended, for Father Hubert turned paler than any one would have believed possible, and swore solemnly to do what was required of him; after which the Prior bade him go and see whether Bernard had yet come back, and, if so, to command that suspected youth at once to attend his Superior's presence.

When Father Hubert, nothing loath, had taken himself off, the Prior said earnestly to Sir Wilfrid—

"Sir Knight, thou seemest to be as anxious as I myself am to preserve this secret. Nevertheless, I will ask it of thee as a favour—nay, as a return for such small services as we may have rendered thee in thy late mischance—that thou wilt never let this matter out of thine own keeping. I know not yet if the thing thou fanciest be truth indeed, and I trust in God's mercy that it be not; but if it should even prove so, I sincerely desire, both for thy brother's sake and for the weal of our Holy Church, that the scandal be preserved a secret.

Wilt thou promise me, my son, that it shall be kept so?"

"So far as it lieth with me," answered the Knight coldly, "I will pledge my word to the bargain. I have no wish to have it known that we have a fighting monk in our family!"

"Nor I that we have one in our Church," rejoined the Prior with equal coldness. "There, my son, we understand each other, but beyond that I fear we are at issue. Thou regardest thy brother with a strange bitterness; while I, though I condemn what he hath done—if he hath indeed done it—have compassion for his youth and the cause which stirred his wrath against this unhappy sinner he hath wrought vengeance on. Truly, my son, I have not forgotten my own love for the mother that bare me, and if any cause might excuse the guilt of bloodshed—though I say not that any might—it would be the cause of a son against his mother's slanderer—ay, Sir Knight, and his mother's murderer; for it is a sacred bond, and one which almost cometh before God Himself, and which God in His wisdom hath ordained should rule all that is best and noblest in us, and small worth or great ruth to him that is not so ruled by it! Moreover, my son, the evil which a man doeth hath no end to it. This poor youth, thy brother, hath had his whole course spoiled by that one lustful shadow which withered his mother's life and turned thy father's noon into darkest night. He hath merits which would have won him a goodly fame—ay, and a pure and noble one—in the world without, and but for that unhappy sin it might have so fallen; but here—and it wringeth my very reins to own it—he hath no sure place, no work for his heart to plan or his hands to

shape, no call from God for his soul to labour in the Heavenly vineyard—nay, rather God's voice soundeth strange to him, and he is hindered from gathering the fruit which haply would have sprung and ripened for him!"

The old Prior was visibly moved by this reflection on the failure of his cherished hopes for the favourite neophyte he had brought up, and the fading glories he had designed for him—to be won in a very different kind of enterprise from that he was at present suspected of. Further discourse, however, on the subject was here put an end to by the entrance of Bernard himself, who approached his Superior with an air of mingled reverence and proud reserve, but without deigning even a look of recognition to his haughty brother. The Prior at once went to the point of his doubts, as though delay added to the pain they caused him, and, turning to his young disciple, said in a gentle voice, which despite his efforts somewhat trembled with emotion—

"I have sent for thee, my son, to ask a plain question of thee, knowing well that thou hast never yet stooped to speak falsehood, and that thou wilt not do so now. Is it true, my son, that thou hast been present at to-day's tournament, and that thou hast entered the armed lists on thine own behalf?"

Whatever surprise Bernard might have felt at this sudden question, which proved that his treasured secret had been betrayed, he gave his brother no satisfaction by showing any, but calmly made answer to the Prior—

"Is it thy wish, my Father, that I should reply to thee in the presence of other witnesses than our two selves?"

"I sent for thee, my son," returned the Prior, "that thou

mightest answer before thine accuser what hath been spoken of thee in thine absence." Then, as though fearing that his words might increase the enmity between the brothers, he added—"That is, my son, I am wrong to speak of accusation, for none hath been made; but thy brother, being distressed at the sudden news of his friend Sir Eustace Devereux's death, offered a random guess that thou wert the strange challenger who had done battle with him; and I, my son, sent for thee to bear me out that he is in error, and that thou hast not so forgotten my teaching or thy duty to God and our Holy Church."

Bernard's eyes flashed for a moment at this reference to his brother's treatment of him; but it was for a moment only, nor did he waver a single instant in his steady bearing beneath the keen glance which the old man bent on him.

"I have remembered my mother," he said quietly, and almost as though he were echoing the late homily of the Prior. "I remember her before I remember anything—either God, or Church, or aught else in Earth or Heaven; and I would forget all, my Father—even these—before I would forget her, or the memory she bequeathed to my keeping. I pray thee, ask my accuser why he hath left me to avenge both his father's wrong and my mother's shame, while he, a sworn knight and trained to arms, made a coward's peace with the villain who vilely betrayed them. Thou sayest well, my Father, that I would scorn to screen my deeds beneath a falsehood, but I desire not to hide what I have now done, save only for thy sake and the Church I so unworthily belong to; for I am proud, Father—not of slaying this fallen slanderer (on whose

soul I pray God to have mercy !) for that any man might have done who had skill and strength enough, but of having won from his perjured lips a confession of the wrong he did, and of having cleared from my mother's name the foul lie that hath so long lain upon it !"

It is probable that this bold speech of the accused monk rather helped than injured his cause with the Prior, and that the old man really liked him the better for it. At all events, the season for surprise had passed, and the worthy Prior had only heard confirmed what he had indeed hoped against and striven hard to disbelieve, but had none the less expected to have proved from the moment when the sick Knight first hinted at it. Moreover, he was wise enough, in Bernard's excited state and before such a witness as Sir Wilfrid, who would have rejoiced at his brother's humiliation, to avoid any strong marks of his displeasure, and to leave the question of blame or punishment for an occasion when he and the young monk might confront the offence together. He therefore merely turned to Bernard with a sorrowful air, and, bowing his head like one that has received a stroke from Heaven, said in quiet tones—

"Alas ! my son, thou knowest not what thou hast done. God gave the life, and thou hast taken it away. It is a fearful burden for any man to weight his soul with ; but for thee, my son, a servant of God, and a chosen labourer in the blessed vineyard—truly, thine own conscience will be thy sharpest scourge, thy bitterest accuser ! Hast thou thought, my son, of what thou mayest have doomed this eternal soul to which thou hast thus suddenly sent to judgment ? Thy

mother lived and died in the sweet light Heaven shed on her, and thy father learned in good time to follow in her saintly steps. Dost thou think that their spirits will thank thee for this blood thou hast poured out, as on a heathen altar, to them and the offence they have long since ceased to trouble for or have forgiven? Verily, my son, I am more grieved for thee than angered with thee, and methinks the remembrance of thy sin will be a worse penance than any which I or thy fellow men could inflict on thee!"

The Prior, who seemed fated to fall into error in his dealings between the two brothers, had again missed his mark in choosing the sick Knight's cell for his present interview with Bernard. The old man's speech had made a deep impression on his follower's mind, and might possibly have led to yet deeper and more lasting results; but however that might have been, Sir Wilfrid, like an evil genius envious of the birth of aught better than itself, stepped in and blew to the winds the good seed which the Prior had just scattered on his brother's soil.

"For my part," he said in a tone of cool contempt, "methinks the best thing my militant brother can do is to offer his sword to the King in exchange for the gallant soldier he hath so miraculously contrived to slaughter. So good a fencer—though the Devil only knows where he got the practice—would mightily please his Grace, and I doubt not the Church could spare his services, which are not likely to add a mark to its saintly calendar!"

Bernard scarcely deigned to return the look his scornful brother cast on him, as he replied haughtily—

"Sir Wilfrid Alderic hath no title to judge me or my actions. It is my duty to hearken to the commands of my lord the Prior; and if it were not, I would gladly do so from the respect I bear him, and for the kindness he hath ever shown me. For cowards and lewd foulers of their own nests I have nought but the contempt that befitteth them and the deeds they glory in!"

"Peace, my son!" interposed the Prior hastily. "Remember that he is thy brother, and that it becometh not children of the same father to wrangle like strangers and bitter aliens.—Nay, my sons: ye have warmed yourselves by the same hearth. For the gentle love of Christ, let not that fire kindle aught betwixt ye but the glow of fellowship and the pleasant heats of brotherly kindness."

"When my father's son," answered Bernard in a stern voice, "remembers that my mother was his father's wife, and that his boasted friend was my mother's murderer, I will also remember that he is my brother and the son of the father that begot me. Till then I cannot be blamed if I forget, what he hath himself taught me to forget, that there is any bond of blood between us."

"It will be long enough ere I so remind thee," rejoined Sir Wilfrid scornfully, "and thou art welcome to forget our bond, as thou callest it, as soon as thou art pleased to. By the mass, I am not so proud of thy brawling feats that thy remembrance bringeth me much pleasure, and my last experience of thee was not very pleasant or very profitable, when thou didst nearly murder me on my sick bed—because, forsooth! I was not willing to listen to all thy bluster against

my father's and my own trusted friend; whom, it seems, thou hast now done to death—the Devil knoweth how, seeing that he was a man as every whit thy superior as a brave knight must needs be to a false monk who hath broken his vows and blusheth not to boast of it!"

If Sir Wilfrid had hoped to provoke his brother to some imprudence by this speech he was disappointed, for the young monk only turned to the Prior, and said calmly—

"I pray thee, my Father, to judge between us. I would not have spoken of what passed at our former meeting had my brother been content to have left it also. I know, my Father, why thou sentest me to watch over his sick bed, and truly, Father, thou wast not wrong. When I found that he was my brother indeed, I besought him to forgive the hurt which in my ignorance I had dealt him, and told him, too, that had I known of the bond betwixt us I would sooner have died than have done him the least scath; but for the pardon I asked he gave me scorn, for the love I offered he returned jest and bitterness; and when I told him that the friend he boasted of was no friend for him, since that villain had wronged our father and ruined the mother which gave me life, he answered that he did not know it, and plainly hinted that he believed in my mother's shame; whereupon I reproached him for his meanness, and, for fear of further mischief between us, left him; and I trusted I might not again have seen him.—Dost thou blame me for this, my Father? Is it my fault that our bond is broken? Are faith and friendship possible with a man who calleth the mother I loved a harlot?"

Those who had only seen the old Prior in his wonted garb,

the robes of meekness and gentleness—like tender moss on spikes of granite—wherewith his religion had clothed his passions, would have been surprised had they beheld the angry flash of his eyes as he listened to Bernard's story. It was a glimpse into the long-buried, but not yet soul-abandoned, original nature of the man, and it spoke, as eloquently as words could have done, of the proud race the good priest had sprung from—a race that bore not lightly with wrong-doing, and whose blood leapt promptly to avenge insult. But neither by voice nor gesture did he betray the sympathy that stirred in him. As he stood there betwixt the two brothers, his tall figure seeming yet more lofty by its commanding aspect, and his venerable countenance half beaming with pity, half clouded with sorrow, and with just a gleam, quickly passing, of noble scorn in it, he might have been taken for an angel mediating between men—whose face, indeed, would be a little shadowed by their contending emotions, but whose heart and understanding were too far removed from their petty concerns, too familiar with the Heavenly counsels of the Master he had briefly flown from, to turn aside from the fixed altar of wedded Judgment and Justice. When Bernard had ended speaking, he waited a while in silence, as though engaged in prayer, or in flinging from him the worldly web which had sought to entangle his free thoughts: then, presently, he made answer to the young monk in a voice calm and measured as was its wont.

"I blame thee not, my son," he said gently. "I wot well that one more patient than thou would have found it hard to bear meekly the provocation thou complainest of; yet thou

hast but to remember what the Blessed Example of all men endured of this foolish world, to suffer thy worst buffets with contentment. Thou art very zealous for thy mother's fame, my son, and I chide thee not for that—save only for this violence thou hast to-day burdened both us and thine own soul with; and truly it was a needless violence, for none that were worthy of thy mother's love ever doubted her, and they that were base enough to believe ill of her are not worth thy vengeance. Verily, my son, thou hast put me to a hard strait; for if I punish thee as is my duty and as thy sin merits, it will be thought that thou hast done somewhat to be wondered at, and thy present trespass may become suspected, which for the sake of thine own family, and especially for the sake of our Holy Church—which even now trembleth on a gulf of men's treason and wickedness—it much concerns us to keep secret. Thou seest, my son, how great a fire thy little flame may kindle. But I will speak with thee on these matters at a more convenient season. Meanwhile, it is our desire that thou goest not forth from this house until such time as we give thee freedom. And thou, Sir Knight," he added in a more constrained tone to Sir Wilfrid, "methinks thou mightest have chosen a worthier friend in thine own brother than in the man who betrayed thy father's peace and that of the noble lady who gave her life for thy father's honour. But I see that it is in vain for ye to dwell in harmony: your spirits are as contrary as contending winds; and it will be well that ye meet as little as may be—nay, if it be possible, better that ye meet not at all."

Sir Wilfrid was the first to reply to the Prior's speech.

"For my part," he said coldly, "I ask for nothing better than to part company with this pious brother of mine. I have given thee my promise, Reverend Father, to keep his secret, but thou hast a surer bond still in my desire that the world remain in ignorance of our relationship."

"And on my side," said Bernard proudly, "if ever I might stoop to falsehood, it would be to deny that Sir Wilfrid Alderic were any kinsman of mine. For the rest, my Father," he added in a voice of deep emotion, "I am ready, not only to obey thy commands, but to give thee my life also—yea, to my last breath, and the last drop of my grateful heart's-blood; because, my Father, thou hast more than crowned thy past kindness to me, and hast made me thy debtor beyond all payment, by speaking nobly of the mother I hold dear, whose life and love were so cruelly lost to me before God had given me strength enough to strike down the lying cowards which slew and slandered her!"

Thus the two brothers parted, the one with a sneer on his face, the other with high looks and proud resentment—trusting, both of them, not to meet again; but Destiny, which a second time proved stronger than the Prior's prayers, had determined that they should meet again: that they should cross and recross one another's paths until the point where all paths are merged in trackless mist, where the loudest-sounding disputes are hushed in a stillness more terrible than contending voices, and where the wandering feet have enough to do in picking their blind way without paying heed to the petty quarrels which once consumed so much of their care.

CHAPTER III

THE SUBSTANCE AND THE SHADOW

It was not many days after the late meeting between the brothers that Sir Wilfrid, mounted on a horse sent thither from his own stables, at length turned his back on the hospitable little sanctuary which he had somewhat ungratefully termed his prison. There is no hint in our manuscript concerning his private reflections on the way, as most probably our Chronicler was never in a position to come at them; but doubtless, as he rode through the quiet forest tracks, the Knight would think a little of the strange events that had befallen him since he had last sported there with his gay companions, his mind only bent on the poor animal he was chasing, certainly without a glimpse of those transformation scenes which the green curtain of his drama was about to lift upon. At any rate, whether he thought of these things or no, his first action, after briefly setting his house in order, was to pay a visit to his old friend and now possible foe, Sir Edmund Dunstan, for the purpose of making his amends, and of putting into practice the scheme of that saintly counsellor, Father Hubert.

On his side, when his visitor's name was announced, the old Knight at first roundly refused to see him, but on reflection changed his mind, and Sir Wilfrid was presently ushered into the same chamber which had witnessed the encounter between Bernard and the late burly Champion of the lists. As he

entered, Sir Edmund regarded the younger Knight with a stern look of displeasure, and took no notice of his proffered hand; but Father Hubert's pupil was well prepared for the task he had set himself, and was altogether a very different personage from the haughty cynic which his brother and the good Prior had made acquaintance with. Without any cringing or undue deference, he approached his host with an easy modesty and natural air of contrition which showed that, if he were not always minded to play them, he was at least familiar with other parts than those of pride and arrogance. The indifference, moreover, which had become so fixed a graft in him as to be almost a vital part of the living tree, was laid aside with a readiness suggestive of the fervour and animation which took its place being, after all, natural, and so—to return to our first image—within convenient call to step upon the boards and speak their speeches. Nevertheless, had he been any but the son of Sir Edmund's old friend and lamented comrade, all his arts would probably have failed in procuring him even the favour vouchsafed—an entry into the house of the offended Knight. As it was, the latter received him with an air of constrained unwelcome, and, since Sir Wilfrid waited for his senior to break the silence, contented himself with saying coldly—

"I am surprised, Sir Knight, at this visit thou art pleased to pay me. After the manner thou hast used me and mine, my house was not the place where I had looked to meet thee; and, indeed, hadst thou been other than thy father's son—and methinks thou hast but little of his good blood in thee!—I had met thee before this in a different place, and for a

different purpose. I pray thee to inform me of thy present errand, for I desire not to keep thee longer here than thy business needeth."

Sir Wilfrid was not greatly dashed by this reception, but he bowed his head respectfully, and in a humble tone answered—

"My errand, worthy Sir Edmund—my father I might almost call thee but for this mischance which hath lost me thy favour—my errand is to beseech thy pardon, and, if it may be, that of thy fair daughter also, for the offence I have so unwittingly committed, and which I have ceased not ever since to repent me of. I seek not, good Sir Edmund, to excuse the fault I have been guilty of, but I swear to thee—on my knees, if thou desirest, or with my hand on the blessed altar—by all that is holy, I swear that I knew not the damsel I spoke to was thy daughter—nay, I learned it but the other day on recovering from my long sickness; else, believe me, I would sooner have been burnt—ay, verily, have been torn limb from limb—than have lifted my least finger, or spoken the slightest word, against one I would give my life's-blood to defend from wrong or insult!"

"I thank thee for thine offer, but my daughter was well enough defended," rejoined the old Knight stiffly. "It seems that the Church, which hath taken so much to itself, hath got the leavings of our knighthood also, and 'tis fitting that it is so, since our boasted chivalry hath gone to sleep over its rusted arms. But even if, as thou sayest, thou knewest not the damsel was my daughter, is it needful that a maiden should have a knight for her father ere she can walk freely and in the light of day without danger of some loose gallant

offending her? By the Rood, that is not the teaching thou didst get from thy father, Sir Knight. Thou hast learned it in some other school than that of my old comrade, Sir Wilfrid Alderic."

"I was mad," replied Sir Wilfrid with an air of penitent grief. "I was a fool, a knave—call me by the worst name thou thinkest will fit my fault—but I swear to thee I meant not to do her wrong. When I first saw her—even at the very moment when I chanced to pass her—I fell truly and beyond my poor control in love with her; and I swore to myself then—knowing not that she was thy daughter, good Sir Edmund—that I would wed her before the whole world, and in spite of all men and all hindrance, were she a peasant or an heiress of the King himself; and with that intent I followed her, and when she fled—the Devil prompted me to run after her, and then I got that cudgelling over the head, which truly I well merited: nevertheless, I swear on my knightly word that I meant no ill to her, but only to make honourable offers to her—unseemly enough, I confess, to thy fair daughter, worthy Sir Edmund, and I would that a second cudgelling might bring me back into thy favour, and I would willingly abide the whipping; but to a simple peasant, as I took her for, seeing she was plainly dressed and I was in too great a heat to take note of it—I would humbly hope thou mightest strain a point to forgive me, good Sir Edmund; for the Lord knows I would sooner lose any man's favour than thine, and have offended any man before thee—ay, and any damsel before thy daughter, the fair Mistress Rosamond."

Though Sir Edmund did not for a moment believe in the

matrimonial aspect of the affront thus presented to him, he was satisfied that his visitor had had no inkling of the insulted damsel's relation to himself, and the profuse apologies which he proffered in excuse of his error a little mollified the old Knight's resentment. Moreover, apart from Sir Edmund's own personal annoyance, there was a ludicrous side to the affair, and in many transactions the divided taps lie close enough to make it somewhile doubtful whether our laughter or our tears will be most drawn upon. The old Knight had lived through the storms of many voyages, and he had come out of them—to make further use of the comparison—with the bronzed complexion and straightforward honesty of a man who has long battled with the waves, but also with the cautious sailing of one who knows their danger. He was, in truth, a somewhat odd mingling of knightly gallantry and worldly prudence; and in the present case—to bring home the moral—while the former quality aroused his disgust and inclined him to quarrel with Sir Wilfrid, the latter attribute opened his eyes to the substantial value of that worthy's position, and disposed him towards a peace, if it were anyways possible with due regard to his own honour. Partly, then, from this motive, and partly out of consideration for the son of his old friend, he offered his hand to the penitent Knight, and said in a heartier tone—

"Be it as thou askest, Sir Wilfrid: for thy father's sake, we will speak no further on this matter. But take an old man's counsel, and lay no more hands upon damsels whose name and condition thou knowest not—no, nor upon other damsels, neither; for I tell thee 'tis a kind of flowers that is hedged

with thorns, and thou wilt get more pricking to thy fingers than ever sweetness that will repay thee."

Sir Wilfrid grasped his host's proffered hand very warmly in return, and laughed heartily at his counsel concerning the fair flowers and their thorns, a subject in which the younger Knight was at least as well versed as the elder. Then he said more seriously—

"Thou hast made me happy, worthy Sir Edmund, as I have not been since that cursed misadventure of mine, in restoring me to thy favour which I had forfeited; but I am like our great forefather in Paradise, incapable of contentment with the one tree forbidden him. I cannot be truly happy without thy fair daughter's forgiveness also. Dost thou think, good Sir Edmund, that she will e'en pardon my offence as thou hast done?"

"I cannot tell thee," replied Sir Edmund. "I cannot answer for any man beside myself, and still less for any woman, and least of all for my daughter. Thou hast got thyself into somewhat of a tangle; for thy excuse which saveth thine honour, namely, that thou didst mistake her for a common damsel, is scarce likely to please her as a compliment. Nevertheless, thou canst try; and if her vanity be content with it, I shall not help to make her any prouder."

Sir Wilfrid, who in his desire to clear himself had not noticed this hole in his defence, devoutly cursed his poverty of invention, and wished that he had devised some better excuse —one, at least, which might have served him better with the lady.

"By the mass," he said, "thou art right about the thorns. I

have been pricked enough to bleed any man's fingers! My head cracked by a monk's cudgel, thy favour almost lost me, and thy fair daughter's assuredly so, and, for aught I know, the King's likewise—verily, a fitting crown for a pretty round body of mischances! I think if I survive this pricking, Sir Edmund, I will follow thy counsel, and never look more on damsel, nor lady either."

"Faith, thou mayst look on them, man," answered Sir Edmund smiling. "I counselled thee to keep thy hands off them." Then he added—"Thou art right as to one of the thorns which have run into thy fingers. I am sorry for thee, and perchance by and by the scratch may be got mended; but for the present thou must bear with it as part of thy lesson, and make the best thou canst of a foolish business."

"My favour with the King is lost, then?" said Sir Wilfrid moodily. "By the Rood, I might have guessed as much! His Grace took note of my absence, and some kind friend, I presume, gave him a history of my accident, with a dainty sauce, doubtless, poured over it by way of season and colouring?"

"Thou hast to thank thy friend Sir Eustace Devereux for that," returned Sir Edmund, "for he accused the monk who struck thee of foul play, which set the King and his Grace of Canterbury by the ears; whereupon the King appealed to me for the true version of the affair, and I gave him my daughter's account of it; and methinks," continued the old Knight stiffly, "it needed not any sauce to be poured on it."

"Nay, good Sir Edmund, I pray thee again to forgive me," said Sir Wilfrid, resuming his penitential tone. "I knew not

that thou wert mine accuser, and no man had a better right to be, and I deserve all that thou and the King may be pleased to judge me. I am sorry to have lost his Grace's favour, but I care not so greatly for it since thou hast consented to take me back into thine."

"I was not thine accuser," replied Sir Edmund haughtily. "It is not my wont to call on the King to meddle in my private matters. I but told him what he asked of me, and as briefly as might serve. Nevertheless, his Grace was vexed to be worsted in the argument, and he liketh not his knights to be found tripping: wherefore he thought fit to pass a rebuke on thee, and to remove thee from the place thou holdest with him."

It is one thing to see a rock over our heads that may chance to crush us, another to feel it doing so. Sir Wilfrid found the news of his public disgrace and the King's displeasure worse than his fancy had pictured while the matter was yet doubtful, and it was a blow that struck a vital part in him—his vanity and his consequence with his fellow-gallants. He was a good illustration of a great master's saying—that Philosophy is the science which teaches us to bear the misfortunes of others with equanimity. Those who knew the Knight as he commonly showed himself would have been astonished at the crest-fallen look which clouded his face on receiving this bad news from Sir Edmund Dunstan. The latter, even, was surprised, and also somewhat sorry for him; and, dropping his haughty tone for one more kindly, said to him—

"Look not so downcast, man. There is more than one

door to the King's favour. He may not always forgive a wrong against himself, but he sometimes forgetteth those of others. I will speak for thee to him when occasion fits, and 'tis like enough he will give thee thy place again. Moreover, thou hast but to tell him that thou didst run after the damsel to make her wed thee, and, though he may think thee a rough wooer, he cannot doubt that thine object was a fair one."

This sarcasm served, even more than the old Knight's promise of help, to rouse Sir Wilfrid from his fit of spleen, and for a moment he flushed angrily, and seemed about to fling his olive-leaf to the waters; but the next, he laughed good-humouredly, and made answer—

"I see thou believest not in my poor apology, worthy Sir Edmund. Nevertheless, I swear to thee that, if the choice were offered me, I would give all I possess to wed the damsel I have been so unhappy as to offend."

The old Knight looked keenly at his companion, as though seeking to read the true thoughts, if he had any, which were stirring in his mind and heart, and then said quickly—

"Is this a jest, Sir Knight, or am I to take what thou sayest as a serious offer for my daughter's hand?"

"It is a subject in which I may have unwittingly stumbled, but it is assuredly one I would not choose for jesting," replied Sir Wilfrid with an aggrieved air; "and, if I had not unhappily lost the right to do so, I would gladly speak as seriously as thou hintest at. As it is, I must e'en eat the fruits of my folly in silence, and forego the greatest joy and glory I might have aspired to."

"Thou sayest truly," rejoined Sir Edmund in a doubtful

voice, "and thou art indeed a bold rider to put a saddle so quickly on thy broken horse. But if thou hadst come with clean hands—nay, if thou hadst helped my daughter from the monk instead of the monk from thee, I should have said the same to thee; that however much I might have liked a match between my old comrade's son and a child of mine, thy wild ways would ill warrant a father's trust, and thy manner of living a woman's happiness."

"But is there no hope for me?" asked Sir Wilfrid earnestly. "I will mend those ways thou speakest of, and my manner of living shall be such as thou and all the world shall approve of. Believe me, worthy Sir Edmund, I am well sickened of the life I lead, and I need but a wife to steady me to be as sober a country knight as thou and my good father have been before me."

The old Knight shook his head gravely as he answered—

"Thou art not a boy, Sir Wilfrid, and all men say what thou sayest when they want what thou wantest. I will not give thee either 'ay' or 'nay' now, but will tell thee one thing only: if thou art serious in thy present proposal, and if I, too, am to hear thee seriously, thou must mend thy ways first, and afterward come again and make this offer of thine. Maybe then, and if my daughter also is minded to it, I shall be in a better humour to listen to what thou hast to say to us. And thou must suffer me to tell thee, Sir Knight," he added, "that what may be an honour in one case becometh an insult in another, and that I had not heard thee thus patiently after the matter which hath fallen between us save out of my old regard for thy father, and my belief that thou didst this wrong to us unwittingly."

"Nor had I spoken, either," said Sir Wilfrid in return, "save for that reference thou didst make to the unknown damsel I would have wedded, and but for the great love I bear to her, known or unknown. I wot well my position, worthy Sir Edmund, and I am thy debtor a thousand times for giving me thy pardon, and a thousand times beyond that for allowing me the least hope of future happiness. Truly, I ask no more of thee than this—that, if I prove myself what I have promised to be, thou wilt not refuse me thy countenance with thy fair daughter."

Both the Knights felt that some apology was needed—the one for introducing, the other for admitting, such a subject under such circumstances. The true apology appears to lie in the fact that neither of them was quite sincere, and that it is difficult for persons to make a quarrel when they are not in real earnest. No one reading the original account could doubt that Sir Edmund favourably entertained the alliance with his former friend's son, and, the difference between them once satisfied, was not unwilling to help him to the happiness he desired; and that, on his side, Sir Wilfrid was well aware of this, and well enough pleased, too, with the advantages that would fall to him—not only in the possession of the fair prize he coveted, but, what he probably valued yet more, the restoration of the royal favour. When two men play at moral battledore, and play so indifferently that they are most of their time hitting the air while the shuttlecock is lying at their feet, or only hitting that mark now and again by way of keeping up the semblance of a game, the situation is apt to become embarrassing. Sir Edmund and his visitor were getting

embarrassed after this fashion when the door opened and they were suddenly relieved, or at any rate the game was interrupted and the play became earnest, by the entrance of the present subject of their discussion, the offended lady herself.

When Rosamond entered the room the last person she expected to see there was the gallant she had encountered in the forest; and having seen him, the look she vouchsafed him was not one to much encourage a lover in the pursuit of a mistress. Standing before the two men who had just been holding debate on her, she indeed resembled what may sometimes be seen in a country theatre—an earnest actor amidst a company of make-shift players, who speak their parts as at a rehearsal, and laugh or whisper between whiles, as though they themselves believed not, nor expected their audience to do so either, in the drama they were enacting. Rosamond, however, believed both in the present drama and in her own part in it, and when she caught sight of the man who had insulted her she flushed indignantly, and would have passed out of the door again had not Sir Edmund called her back, and, taking her hand, said to her—

"Do not run away, child. Here is a penitent ready to do I know not what—kill himself at the very least—to obtain thy pardon for that offence he hath unwittingly caused thee. He desireth to explain to thee——"

"I require no explanation," broke in Rosamond quickly. "I only wish to forget what hath happened. I knew not that this—that Sir Wilfrid Alderic was here. I pray thee, father, give me leave to return to my own chamber."

"Nay, but hear me for a moment only, fair Mistress

Rosamond!" exclaimed Sir Wilfrid, bending on his knee before her. "I swear to thee that the remorse my folly hath brought me hath been a worse penance that any thy gentle wrath could have devised for me—do not make me for ever miserable by withholding thy sweet pardon, or banishing me from thy sweet presence! On my knees, before Heaven, I vow that I knew not who thou wert, else would I have died ere I had spoken aught amiss to thee; and, as I have already told thy father, worthy Sir Edmund here—I pray thee believe me, fair Mistress Rosamond—I had no ill thought when I so pursued thee. Truly, however madly and foolishly—nay, wrongfully—I meant but to offer my heart and hand to the strange damsel I then imagined thee; and by Heaven," added the Knight with real enthusiasm as he looked up at the fair face above him, "methinks any man's wandering might be forgiven him with such a star to tempt him from the path he walked in!"

Rosamond was very young, but love, though it lays a light hand on innocence, teaches the heart quickly. Sorely troubled and shamefaced, she longed to be back in her own room, in the forest with Bernard—anywhere out of that hateful presence; but, being kept there by her father's command, she was in a manner brought to bay, and all the resolution in her gentle nature was aroused. The excited flush vanished from her features, and the trembling from her limbs, as with a firmness that astonished her father she made answer to the Knight's speech.

"I pray thee to rise, Sir Knight," she said quietly. "The offence thou speakest of I freely forgive thee, and methinks

that is all that needeth be said between us. With my father's leave, I will now return to my own chamber."

"But thy favour, gentle lady? I cannot rise till I have that," pleaded Sir Wilfrid in eager tones. "I pray thee, fair Mistress Rosamond, deny me not thy sweet favour also; for verily, wanting that, the rest would be like the Earth without the Sun, like beauty with no light to discover it!"

"No, not my favour," returned Rosamond firmly. "Whatever be its worth, that is in mine own keeping, Sir Knight, and I give it not to those who do as thou hast done—who treat defenceless maidens as thou dost, when thou deemest them without help and in thy power."

"But I swear before Heaven and our Lady that I knew thee not," repeated Sir Wilfrid with great fervour. "Had I dreamed, had I had the faintest thought, who thou wert and what name thou barest, I would have been torn in pieces ere I had said the least word or done the slightest deed to offend thee!"

"It mendeth not thy offence with me, Sir Knight," answered Rosamond gravely, "because thou didst mistake me for a poor maiden. Nay, it maketh thy deed the worse, for it addeth cowardice to insolence. But I desire not," she went on quickly, "to say aught unkind to thee. I only wish to forget what hath happened, and it is not my fault that I now speak of it before thee."

Sir Wilfrid rose to his feet with looks full of vexation; but, soon mastering himself, he made a fresh effort to win the offended lady's favour.

"I pray thee, fairest lady, mix a little mercy with thy

judgment," he said with an appealing glance. "Hast thou no forgiveness for a mere thoughtless folly, a sudden mad caprice —ay, and one regretted as soon as yielded to? By our Lady, if thou knewest the least worth thy beauty weareth, thou wouldst not wonder that men should lose their wits to thee, and thy heart would find pardon for the faults which thine own face should be justly charged with."

In spite of her indignation, Rosamond almost laughed at this piece of gallantry; but she replied coldly—

"Thine is but a poor compliment, Sir Knight, for if my worth be so great as thou sayest, by thine own showing it deserved better worship than thoughtless folly or mad caprice; and for thy admiration—there was little in thy mode of hinting it that a true maiden would either thank thee for or be proud of."

"I was guilty of too great a freedom—I humbly own to it," said the Knight desperately, "but I swear to thee, as I have already sworn to thy good father here, that my intent was honourable. I swear that I meant no worse than to offer my hand and heart to the strange damsel I took thee for, and, by my faith, a man can do no more, be he the King himself, to show the worship he hath for a fair maiden."

"And by *my* faith, Sir Knight, thou didst leave little choice to the damsel," rejoined Rosamond with a touch of scorn that was new to her. "Dost thou—doth any gentleman, even the King himself—deem it meet wooing of a free maiden to run after her in the open forest, and, whether she will or no, force her to smile on his proffered favours? Truly, Sir Wilfrid Alderic must have rated his own worth very highly, or the

strange damsel's very cheaply, to have made so sure that his suit would be so welcome!"

At this point of the debate the old Knight slipped quietly out of the room, either in the hope that the two disputants would more easily settle the argument without a witness, or else because he felt a trifle ashamed of his own particular share in it. This manœuvre was a great relief to Sir Wilfrid; nor was Rosamond, although indignant at her father's desertion, much embarrassed by it, for, like a timid combatant who only warms with the stir and strife, she had forgotten her maidenly reserve in her maidenly resentment, and was resolved, once for all, to face the man who had so ungallantly pursued, and she felt was still pursuing, her, and to make him understand, beyond doubt or quibble, the view she took of his conduct, and the value she set on his proffered friendship. That bold wooer was a little confounded, and altogether surprised, at the stubborn defence he had encountered; and, despite his admiration for his fair enemy, and his desire to stand well with both her and her father, his impatience began to get the better of his prudence, and to peep through the penitential garb he had donned for the occasion. Notwithstanding, when the old Knight had left the room, he turned to Rosamond, and said humbly enough—

"I acknowledge my fault to the full, fair Mistress Rosamond, and thou canst not judge me more hardly than my own heart doth. But is my offence never to be pardoned? Am I never to know grace again? I pray thee, what is penitence without pardon—what were either without the fault that standeth between them? Is it so great a crime in Beauty's eye to

have been dazzled by the beams which fell from it? Methinks, fair Sun, thou shouldst be willing rather to pity *my* hurt than to blame me for thine own, for I warrant 'tis the deeper and more dangerous."

Rosamond's gentle eyes flashed at this impertinence, though, in truth, the Knight meant none, any more than a Corncrake means discord when he croaks a Nightingale out of tune on some sweet night in Spring when all the world is listening.

"Thou presumest, Sir Knight," she said indignantly, "and thou changest thy ground to suit thine own weapons. I have told thee plainly that I forgive thine offence to me, and as plainly that I desire not thy friendship. Dost thou think to affront a maiden at thy pleasure, and win back her smiles when it best suiteth thee? By our Lady, thou judgest lightly both of thyself and us! But thou judgest wrongly, Sir Knight," she added, drawing herself up proudly and looking at him with kindling eyes—"at least, thou judgest me wrongly; for I regard thy present visit as an insult—ay, and little better than thy former one, and I choose not for my friends knights who so ill follow their noble craft as to attack maidens they chance to find free for their rude violence."

Here the Knight, in his irritation at the lady's reception of him, committed a great imprudence, for he made answer impatiently—

"By the mass, fair mistress, thou judgest me more hardly than doth thy worthy father, for he hath both forgiven my fault, and lent me his grace to win thy sweet pardon—ay, and, if it may be, thy sweet favour also; and Heaven wotteth," continued Sir Wilfrid, carried by his own fervour into sincerity,

"that I would willingly change all which God or man hath ever given me to gain that boon from thee!"

"My father," returned Rosamond with as much haughtiness as Nature had been pleased to grant her, "hath a right to command my obedience, but he cannot give thee my favour. I am a free maiden, Sir Knight—free, at least, to choose my friends—and thy heart cannot be so mean as to desire a friendship that is not willingly bestowed on thee."

"I love thee, Rosamond!" exclaimed the Knight passionately, borne beyond the bounds of prudence or cool forethought by the sight of the fair confusion before him, all warm with indignation and maidenly blushes—"I tell thee, I care not whether I be mean or no, or whether I walk straight or crooked, nor for aught the world thinketh, be it good or ill, of me—no, nor whether I be wise or foolish in now speaking to thee, for, by the living Lord, I must speak, and I cannot keep my tongue from prating of my heart's passion! I tell thee, Rosamond, I loved thee from the moment I first looked on thee, and I love thee now—ay, and as I have never loved before, nor ever shall again; and I would give all this world holdeth for me—wealth, fame, honour—yea, and the hopes of Paradise beyond them—for one smile of that sweet face of thine! I pray thee, I pray thee humbly," he added, kneeling once more to her, and striving to take her hand, a freedom which the girl prevented by starting back from him—"I pray thee of thy gentle pity, and for the grace of the pure shrine thou servest at, to forgive the wrong I did thee—ay, and, if thou canst, to take pity, too, on the heart thy shaft hath stricken—

to spare one drop of thy sweet ruth for the wound which only thy love or death can cure or conquer!"

Rosamond, who had received all Sir Wilfrid's former speeches with the disdain their flippancy merited, was greatly surprised at the earnestness of this last one; and deeming it a true outburst of passion, however distasteful it might be to her own feelings, her nature was too generous, and withal serious, to treat it otherwise than with respect and kindness. There was a touch, also, in the Knight's appeal that reminded her for a moment of Bernard—of Bernard as he was always; not as this man, whose earnestness was but a flash of the flint, a mere spark which needed something beside itself, some substance or force beyond it, to strike into brief being. Rosamond, however, was too young, at any rate too ignorant, to distinguish between the different kinds of passion; and though, apart from her one experience of him, she instinctively disliked the Knight, at the present moment she saw only a man who had declared that he sincerely loved her, and who claimed her pity for the suffering she had caused him. Therefore she forgot her own grievance, and gave him all the consolation—usually not much in such cases—that was in her power.

"Truly, Sir Knight, thou greatly grievest me," she replied gently, "and, if thou indeed carest for it, I do give thee my ruth right sincerely, ay, and the friendship, also, that but now I refused to thee; but more, Sir Knight, I cannot give thee — I cannot return the love thou profferest me; and methinks it is kinder to tell thee so without doubt, and I pray thee, for both our sakes, not to speak of it again to me."

There are maidens who refuse our love after the manner of a retreating general who leaves a gap for his enemy to follow him by; and there are others who give us our grace of doom from behind walls so steep that we at once perceive the folly of trying to scale them, and forthwith retire to the best tune our limping drummer can beat out for us. Rosamond's gentle answer and pitying look convinced Sir Wilfrid, in a way that her scorn and anger had failed to do, that she would never love him, and he sprang hastily to his feet, sending the angel he had briefly borrowed about his business, and summoning again that other kind of attendant who was more commonly in the Knight's service.

"When a man layeth his all at the feet of the woman he loves," he said angrily, "he taketh not pity and friendship in return for it. Dost thou think, my fair mistress, that no one hath any pride but thyself? By the Lord, I have humbled myself this day as I have never done to living thing before—no, nor ever will again, may I be racked for it! I did thee a hasty wrong, and I have kissed the ground beneath thy feet to win thy grace from thee; and I have offered thee what I trow many fair dames and proud damsels would have gladly taken from me, and thou hast treated me and my offers as though we were fit sport for thy fine scorn! By the mass, I am no spider to be shuddered at, or ape to be made a jest of; and if a belted knight, with broad acres at the back of him, is not high enough for thy proud looks—then——"

Here Sir Wilfrid, whom wounded vanity, jealousy, and disappointed desire, those three potent stirrers of human spleen, had carried alike beyond his worldly prudence and

his knightly courtesy, suddenly became conscious of the folly he was committing, and he broke off his speech quickly, saying in apologetic tones—

"By Heaven, I am mad, and I pray thee of thy grace to think me so, and to lay it to the charge of my great love for thee, which is almost excuse enough for any folly a man may be tripped into! I pray thee, fair Mistress Rosamond, forget, for God's sake, what I have said to thee, for I meant it not—I swear to thee, as I am a true knight, I meant not a word of it; and I do love thee—ay, faith, may I be burned if I do not!"

"Thou art not a true knight, and thou didst mean what thou hast said to me!" answered Rosamond, with trembling limbs and eyes flashing with resentment. "By our Lady, I am glad I am in my father's house; and methinks it was well for me that I had a protector in yonder forest, for truly thou art not one a weak maiden would choose to be her champion!"

"Thou didst certainly prefer my pious brother," rejoined Sir Wilfrid with a dark look; "and, since his sacred office proved no hindrance to his warlike tastes, perchance he may be my rival in a more gentle craft also. By the mass, I had not thought of it, but it fits the puzzle aptly! I deemed it strange at the time that he chose rather to make a quarrel with me than tell me thy name when I asked him."

A flush of surprise and indignation once more spread over Rosamond's face, and drove from it the pallor which the Knight's former speech had brought there. Turning to him with a fire and passion that were very strangers to her, she said hotly—

"Thou art a pitiful sample of knighthood, to twice insult a maiden when there is none by to stay thy tongue for thee! Thy brother is not a knight, but he is worth a thousand such as thou art, and had he been here thou wouldst not have dared to have spoken thus to me! I will stay with thee no longer, and thou mayst tell my father, if thou likest, why I left thee—because thou knowest not how to treat a lady with courtesy!"

Saying which, Rosamond made a move towards the door; but Sir Wilfrid was before her, and, respectfully bending his head to her, said in a humble tone—

"I will spare thee that trouble, fairest lady. By my troth, thou art right and I am wrong. Twice have I been rude to thee; but, believe me, it is not my wont, and my only excuse is my love for thee, which hath verily turned my wits—ay, from the first moment my eyes looked on thee in yonder forest. I will not ask thee to again forgive me; but I will school myself to be more worthy of thy sweet favour, so that thou mayst perchance come to think better of me, and of my poor knighthood thou now holdest so cheaply."

Then the Knight left her; and Rosamond, tired and troubled, sat down by the open window, and looked out on the quiet waters of the moat below, and over the spreading forest, and to the dark hills beyond, behind which the sun was just making ready to sink; and wondered in her heart what all this sad stir might mean, and how it would all end, and whether the Devil had set it going, and what all the world's clamour, good and evil all counted, might be worth. Then, thinking of the forest, she thought of Bernard, and the strange difference between the brothers; and, scanning the face of late

events, she began, in a pious kind of way, to doubt whether Heaven had not made a great mistake, and whether it would not have been a better arrangement to have chosen Bernard for the knight and his brother for the monk—a proposal which, with all Bernard's faults, it may be questioned if the good Prior would have much thanked her for.

Rosamond's dreams were at this point broken in upon by the sound of the opening door, and the return into the room of the old Knight her father. The latter looked at her for a moment with a curious expression, and then said—

"Faith, what is the matter with thee, child? Thou lookest more like a nun who hath just been veiled than a free damsel that hath been entertaining a gay gallant! By the mass, too, Sir Wilfrid hath fared no better. I met him going out at the hall gate, and he seemed about as sprightly as a plucked hawk, not a feather of his plumes lying straight on him, and with a face that would honour a funeral! Say, child, what hast thou been doing to him? I left him to mend his hurt with thee, but methinks thou hast given him his death-wound."

It is commonly admitted that Evil ages at a much faster rate than does Good, which is one way of throwing the shadows of Mortality and Immortality. The last few hours had oppressed Rosamond with a sense of the years she had hitherto been unconscious of, and she replied to her father's bantering words in a way she would never have dreamed of doing before this embarrassing burden had fallen upon her—by a speech as mocking as his own.

"If I am so dangerous," she said, "and Sir Wilfrid is so

tender, methinks it was scarce prudent of thee to leave us so long together."

But if Rosamond had gained a peep of the world's ways, she knew not yet, any better than a child, how to walk in them, and, like a child, she fell at her first venture. The strain of the late storm had been too much for the slight vessel that was tossed in it, and the girl had no sooner retorted on her father than she burst into a passionate flood of tears, and threw herself, sobbing, upon his breast, which, to complete our image, was the only port the poor ship could at present make for and put into.

"Faith, what is the matter with thee?" exclaimed the old Knight again, fondly stroking her hair, and soothing her as best he could. "Thou lookest as if thou hadst seen an ogre. What hath yonder gallant been doing to thee? I thought thou hadst wounded *him;* but, by my troth, ye appear to have worsted one another!"

"Thou shouldst not have left me with him, father," returned Rosamond between her sobs. "He is a false knight, and unworthy of the name he bears, and he hath insulted me worse than he did before, and——I hate him!—that is, I dislike him, and wish never to see him again!" she broke off suddenly, the remembrance of the Knight's speech against Bernard here coming to her mind, and training all the small battery of wrath which lay rusting there on the rash invader of her heart's treasure.

"By the mass, he cannot have dared to offer rudeness to thee a second time, and now that he knoweth thee for my daughter—if he hath he shall pay for it!" answered Sir

Edmund quickly. Then, in a quieter tone, he said—"But how hath he insulted thee, child? Tell me what he did that gave offence to thee?"

"He had the insolence to offer his hand to me—ay, and when I had but just refused his friendship," replied Rosamond indignantly; "and when I told him that I did not love him, and that it might never be, and prayed him not again to speak of the matter to me—truly, father, he turned on me and rated me for my want of taste, and for disdaining the great honour he had done me!"

"The honour is not beyond our bearing, and he seeketh for grace soon enough after pardon," said Sir Edmund; "but after all, child," he added laughing, "'tis no great insult to have asked thy hand in marriage, and thou must make some allowance for his taking ill thy refusal of him. 'Tis not pleasant for a man to get cold shoulder from the woman he hath set his heart upon."

"I believe not that he hath got any heart," rejoined Rosamond with a disdainful shrug which served to point the Knight's metaphor; "and if he hath, I have no wish to meddle either with it or its desires, save so far as to pray our Lady to amend them. Was it not an insult to speak as he did to me, father, and so soon after his rudeness in yonder forest?"

"I know not that," said Sir Edmund thoughtfully. "His father would not have done so, either hap, nor would his brother, the monk, I'll be sworn to it. Certes, that is a fine fellow, and I would he were in his brother's shoes, and the Knight in the other's sandals! 'Twas a bad choice both

ways—this world's loss, and no great bargain to the one above it. However, 'tis past crying for, and the poor boy's out of our reckoning. As for this Sir Wilfrid, he is good enough in the main, but the King and the Court have a little spoiled him, and his mother's blood runneth thick in him—she was a proud Norman, and caused the Knight her husband a few creases, which it took the sweet saint that followed her some pains to get smoothed again. Nevertheless, I tell thee Sir Wilfrid will come right in the end, and he needeth but a proper rope and anchor to hold him tight in harbour—faith, I am sure of it. Thou must remember, Rosamond, that he knew not who thou wert when he met with thee, and though I defend it not a jot, and have e'en told him so very plainly, he is not the only man, no, nor knight or lord neither, that deemeth it small harm to run after a pretty face when he seeth one; and he is a man of good position, and the son, too, of my ancient comrade, and I desire not to make an enemy of him, nor to let what was assuredly an accident, and for which he hath offered a fair apology, set a breach between the old friendship of our families."

Rosamond listened to this speech with mingled feelings of doubt, and hope, and fear; but though the old Knight had been at the pains to veil his half-formed purpose, and even, in his wisdom, to censure Sir Wilfrid a little, or at most but partly praise him, trusting to time to mend the holes in his position, the girl's heart leapt at a bound over all these fences, choosing rather to fight its enemy in the open than to wait until the ground round it were hemmed about with fosse and breast-work. Starting hastily from her father's arms, she turned to

him with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, and in a trembling voice said to him—

"Tell me, father—dost thou wish me to wed this Sir Wilfrid Alderic—this false knight who insulted me in the forest?"

Sir Edmund, to say truth, had not contemplated this sudden development of his scarce-designed subject: only the strong etching-lines had been pointed by him, leaving all the stippling, mezzo-tinting, or what form of graving else, to be filled in at a more convenient season, and by other hands. The girl's direct appeal, however, hurried on the work, and, spite of will or wit, the old Knight was forced to reply somehow to her question.

"Faith, child," he said doubtfully, "thou askest me a very straight question, and I know not that I can answer thee as straightly. I would like well enough to see an union betwixt our families, and Sir Wilfrid is a good match for any damsel, if she regardeth him with favour in other matters. He hath the best estate in all the country here, and thou must remember, child, I am but a poor knight, and that it becomes me to try and better thy place and fortune. I think, too, that Sir Wilfrid would make thee a good husband when he had once wedded thee, and thou wouldst, moreover, have an honourable standing at the King's court. Truly, child, I have not thought very deeply of it, but thou mightest do worse than wed such a knight as Sir Wilfrid Alderic."

Rosamond grew crimson with indignation as she followed her father's words, and then as suddenly became pale again. Vainly striving for some time to find speech to answer him, she at length burst into a fresh flood of tears, and said bitterly—

"Thou hast been cruel to me, father, even to think of such a thing for me. Had my poor mother been here, I wot she would not have left me to a villain's insults, nor given me to the first gallant that chanced to fancy me!"

It is probably as unkind a thing as can be said, to compare a man or woman unfavourably with a dead relative whose memory belongs equally to the accused and the accuser. To throw a former husband or wife in the teeth of the reigning spouse is not worse than, is hardly so bad as, a flea-bite, for the irritation covers the sting; but for a mother to tell her son that his dead father treated her better than he himself does, or, as in the present case, for a daughter to contrast regretfully her lost mother with her living father, is a touch in a tender place. The old Knight felt it so, and it was with a look of deep pain that he turned to Rosamond, and said in a mournful voice—

"Thou needst not remind me of thy mother, Rosamond. Heaven knoweth my thoughts are ever full of her, and that I have sorrowed for her every hour since I lost her, and shall so sorrow until God be pleased to take me to her! By our Lady, if thou art as happy with thy husband as I was with thy mother, and mournest him as much as I have mourned her, thou wilt know something of joy and sorrow!"

Rosamond flung her arms round her father's neck, and kissed him, and wept and smiled over him, and sobbingly begged him to forgive her; and soon all was peace again, and the cloud, for a time at least, was rolled away. Then, taking his hand in hers, and kissing him once more, as a kind of seal to their new truce, she said to him—

"Do not think of sending me away from thee, father, or bettering my position, as thou callest it. I am as happy here with thee and the Forest as ever my heart wisheth to be; and I desire not to be rich, or great, or—anything that thou hast spoken of," she broke off with a little blush, and nestling up to the old man in a way that would have coaxed Diogenes himself to have burned his beloved barrel over his bare head.

"And least of all to wed Sir Wilfrid Alderic?" returned the old Knight laughing. "I tell thee, child, thou needst not take him, if thou hast no mind to it. I but thought, and think now, that he is the best match for thee our country can offer; but I will not press thy hand where thy heart shrinketh. Faith, if his brother Cuthbert only wore a knight's spurs instead of a monk's sandals, I should like him better still, for he hath a knight's heart in him whatever be the cloak that covers it; and methinks thou wouldst like him better, too, since a woman hath ever got a smile for the man that hath risked his body for her. But 'tis ill wishing where there is no choosing; and truly, so far as this world counts, the poor boy is no better than a shadow."

It was well for Rosamond that the darkness was beginning to fall, and that the old Knight did not look over-closely at her face while he made this last speech of his: else might he have seen a pretty witness of a blush there, which gave evidence somewhat contrary to his own—nay, flatly disputed and disproved it, and went to show that what he had been pleased to call a shadow was in truth very much of a substance.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHINK IN THE SHUTTER

LATE in the afternoon as it was when Sir Wilfrid left the old Knight's house, he betook himself on another visit—namely, to pay his respects to, and condole with, the unhappy relict of his former friend Sir Eustace Devereux. Domestic history, like political, repeats itself, and there was something in the Knight's present temper and errand strangely akin to the luckless Champion's own exit from the same house, when he travelled, in as bad a mood, over the same ground, and bent his horse's head towards the same goal, on an Autumn afternoon only a few weeks earlier than this one. The day itself, however, was unlike enough the one that had gone before it. Then, the gloom of the atmosphere had well matched the sour humour of the angry knight who rode through it; but now, the pure sky and cheery sun, and later on the crescent moon, were ill at harmony with the dark passions and vindictive spirit of the thwarted gallant who spurred his horse onward, indifferent to all the graces of Nature that were about and above him.

On reaching the abode of Mistress Edith, the same porter, who had formerly relieved his master of a portion of that worthy's ill-temper, opened the gate to the Knight, and, having secured his horse, led Sir Wilfrid into the house, and into the presence of the bereaved lady. Mistress Edith was in the very room where she and Sir Eustace had passed

that last evening together ere her dead Knight's hasty summons to meet the King; and as Sir Wilfrid entered, his own wrath shivered and fled, like a weak thing from a stronger, before the utter desolation he looked upon. The unhappy mourner was seated on a low chair exactly facing the one which her lost companion used to occupy, and the latter poor proof of emptiness remained untouched in its old place, as though in readiness for its absent owner at any moment that he might come in to claim it. But Mistress Edith's eyes, though they sometimes glanced at this familiar relic, were fixed on another object. Close beside her, so that her arm leaned on the raised foot of it, was a long couch, on which, propped and padded in an easy attitude to resemble life, lay the full-length armour of the Knight as he had last worn it in the fatal combat which caused his death; while upon the hauberk, stained and pierced in grisly witness of what had happened, rested the sword he had then wielded, so placed that its point touched and pressed against the tarnished breast—that very hole in it to which Mistress Edith's eyes were directed, and which both they and the weapon seemed to regard as the one forlorn mark that was now left them.

Mistress Edith herself was not the common picture of hopeless grief. She did not appear to have wept much, nor had her health languished or her beauty faded by the wonted neglect which these suffer in times of great affliction: rather she seemed, like a weak but careful athlete, to have trained herself to her full compass, and like an athlete, too, for a purpose. The grief in her showed itself in her utter abandonment of—her almost ghostlike isolation from, yet

equally ghostlike haunting in—the world around her. Save for one thing only, she might have been a spirit with Sir Eustace—so far as she had any place in life, or took any part in the world's business. Sir Wilfrid, on entering the room, was most struck with the look in her eyes. These seemed, while fixed upon the figure beside her, to be gazing at some object far beyond it, and the Knight afterwards told how the poor lady's look had startled him, and how at the time he had believed that she was staring at a spectre. That Mistress Edith's vision, however, was within easy call of the common world was shown by the promptness with which she rose and welcomed her visitor as soon as he was announced to her. Motioning him to a vacant chair on the further side of her, she received him with the warmth due to a valued friend of her lost Knight, and Sir Wilfrid scarce knew which to be most astonished at—the strange vacancy he had at first found her in, or the readiness with which at his entrance she had flung the cloudy vapours aside from her. Either condition was perplexing to one who had come to speak commonplaces of condolence. Moreover, though a close friend of Sir Eustace, the Knight had seldom met Mistress Edith during his brief visits to the neighbourhood, and so was little acquainted with her temper and peculiarities. For a while, therefore, he sat in silence, resembling a man who, having prepared a speech upon a certain subject, and suddenly finding that subject changed, has perforce either to hold his tongue or speak without book, as his wits judge best for him. Sir Wilfrid's wits, which, if not very deep, were mostly quick enough, finally chose the latter course, and

after some consideration he made bold to say to the bereaved lady—

"Truly, fair Mistress Edith, many strange events have happened since we last met here, and the shafts of misfortune have showered thickly upon both of us—upon thee, I grieve greatly that it hath chanced so, the more cruelly. We have both lost a dear friend, one that might well put the world into mourning, for God knows there is none left that was fit to hold his stirrup; and methinks next to thee I am most wounded by his loss, seeing that he was a friend I loved better than a brother, and that we were comrades and fellow-soldiers more years than I can reckon; and indeed I wot not how the world will run without him; and—truly, fair Mistress Edith, thou knowest how I valued him, and that I feel for thy loss as one that is able to weigh the worth of it."

Mistress Edith made no answer for some moments, but she took the Knight's hand and pressed it; and then presently, pointing to the iron figure at her side, she said in a low voice—

"Look at him there! Thou wert his best friend, Sir Wilfrid Alderic—tell me what thou thinkest of him? That is only the bare shell of him; but—tell me—when his soul and body filled it, was there a man born that would have dared to fling a gage at those mailed feet of his? Yet, by the living God, a fellow with no more wit of arms than I have maketh bold to come and do it—ay, and to give the lie to him before the whole world, and to slay him—a knight that was held the best in the King's service—as lightly as if he

had been a boy or a maiden squire! Dost thou think it was fairly done, Sir Knight? Look at his arm there! Was it not able to have wrung the breath out of twenty such wrynecks as this fellow that tricked his life from him? Look but on his chest and shoulders! What man is there, be he the stoutest knight that weareth arms, that could do better than half fill them? I tell thee, the deed which tripped him was a crooked one, and God Himself should not persuade me that it came by aught save the Devil and foul magic!"

"By the mass, I thought the same—I said as much when I first heard of it," replied Sir Wilfrid in an eager tone. "I believe not, either, that such a knight as Sir Eustace could have been so lightly handled by a mere whipper-snapper of a stranger whom no man had ever heard of, and whose cause no one knew, unless, as thou sayest, the Devil stood behind him and pointed his sword for him. Faith, too, it savours of the Devil's ways for this fellow to have vanished so soon after the play was ended!"

"He had a cause," returned Mistress Edith thoughtfully, "though what it was I know not well as yet; but on the night before the jousts I had a strange dream, in which I saw a monk pierce Sir Eustace with a long sword; and when I told it to my poor Knight, and begged him not to go to this tournament as I feared God's hand was in the matter, instead of laughing at me as I had looked from him, he fell into a great wrath with me, and accused me of prying into his secrets—ay, and, as I now remember, of prating with the Prior himself; wherefore," added Mistress Edith with a perplexed look at Sir Wilfrid, "I am assured that a monk

hath had a hand in killing Sir Eustace—nay, methinks it was a monk's hand which did it, though how or why I yet know not, but I doubt not in good time to read the riddle."

As Mistress Edith made this statement Sir Wilfrid almost betrayed his own and the Prior's secret by the sudden start he was surprised into; and, as it was, the bereaved lady noticed the strange look in his face, and her manner towards him at once changed with the discovery.

"I pray thee, Sir Wilfrid Alderic," she said abruptly, "wert thou as great a friend of my dead Knight as thou dost say thou wert, and he did think thee?"

Sir Wilfrid was still more embarrassed by this sudden question, accompanied as it was by the keen glance of Mistress Edith's eyes—weapons which seldom failed, as poor Sir Eustace, had he been within reach of hearing, could have borne witness to, in hitting the mark they aimed at. The Knight, however, bore their scrutiny as well as he was able, and answered pretty promptly—

"Truly, fair lady, if I were not, I know not who might have been called so. But why dost thou thus hint at any doubt of it?"

"Because," replied the lady, still looking keenly at her visitor, "I believe, if thou wert so minded, thou couldst tell me the name of the traitor which wrought this wrong on him."

"Faith, but I—I pray thee, fair Mistress Edith, why dost thou think that?" stammered Sir Wilfrid in anything but his wonted tones of assurance. "I pray thee, how should I know the fellow's name who wrought this mischief? Certes, I was

a true friend of poor Sir Eustace; but I am not a wizard, that I can find out dark secrets for the asking."

"I did not take thee to be a wizard," returned Mistress Edith coldly, "but I believe thou knowest this dark secret none the less; and if thou dost, and wilt not tell it to me, methinks thou art no true friend of my dead Knight."

"But thou forgettest," said Sir Wilfrid, "that I have but just recovered from a long illness, and that a man's senses are not very apt at guessing riddles after a blow like the one which broke this head of mine. Why, I only heard of the mischance on——"

The Knight paused suddenly, and the lady finished his sentence for him by saying—

"On the day when it happened, was it not?" Then, as Sir Wilfrid coloured and looked annoyed, she added—"Nay, Sir Knight, thou needst not take offence at me. I wot well that thou wast a friend of my lost lord, and I desire not to quarrel with any man that hath shaken his hand as thou hast done. I have said all to thee I have to say, and if thou wilt not help me to avenge him, thou must e'en do as thou hast a mind to; and after all," she broke off with kindling eyes, glancing once more at the prostrate figure, "I know not if I would have it otherwise, for I alone have sworn on that good sword of his to avenge him, and it is for my wit to find the knave which struck him, for my hand to deal the blow which shall make the debt equal!"

"I would gladly help thee if I could," answered Sir Wilfrid feelingly, "alike for thy sake and the friend we have both lost. I swear to thee, I am as willing as thou art to see vengeance done on the man that slew him."

"It was a monk that struck thee in the forest," said Mistress Edith with a quick look at Sir Wilfrid, "and it was a monk that tripped the sword from my Knight in a fencing-bout at Sir Edmund Dunstan's; a monk, too, that shed his blood in that dream of mine I told thee of; and a monk that dropped suddenly from the skies, or leaped out of the pit below, to confess him when he lay dying in those cursed lists yonder—a cowled monk, truly, whose face, when I hinted that one of his black Brethren had done the deed, looked as conscious as thine did a moment back because I taxed thee with knowing my lord's slayer. I tell thee, as my poor Knight said, 'tis a monk always, and the Devil is in this matter if a monk doth not prove to be at the bottom of it!"

"I think thou art so far right," replied Sir Wilfrid, "that these monks have a hand in most matters; and I would they might keep their fingers to their own concerns, and leave meddling with those of others. Yet I see not how thou bringest this accident to a monk's door. 'Tis true enough, I got my hurt from one of them; but it was partly mine own fault, and it fell of a chance meeting. For the fencing-bout thou speakest of, I had not heard of it; but thou must remember that all monks are not alike, and that there are knights and gentlemen in the Cloister as well as sober citizens, and there might happen to be one among them as good a swordsman as poor Sir Eustace, though, I own, I never met his equal."

"Ay, but not two of them," said Mistress Edith quickly. "Thou sayest thou hast not met one, Sir Knight: dost thou think it likely that in so short a space, and in this forest, two

swordsmen could be found to worst so stout a champion as Sir Eustace? Thyself, too, who wast but little my Knight's inferior, to be disarmed and beaten by a monk with a common cudgel—that maketh a third! By the Rood, 'tis not possible, and I will wager my vows of vengeance 'twas the same hand did all, or else the Devil!"

"The Devil shall pay for it, then, for I will return that same cudgel-stroke to the knave which gave it me, be he devil or man, and I wot he is neither the one nor the other!" exclaimed the Knight imprudently, forgetting in the remembrance of his defeat and the disgrace which fell of it all the cautious resolves he had come armed with for this interview.

Mistress Edith looked at him with a smile of triumph, as she said curtly—

"Verily, Sir Knight, thy tongue hath spoken the truth in spite of thee. It seemeth thou *dost* know the man I asked thee for, and I thank that small member of thine for doing me a kindness which thy warm heart refused me."

In his vexation at this moment, it is probable that Sir Wilfrid would have willingly parted altogether with the unruly member alluded to, which had twice in one day betrayed the interests of its unlucky master: however, he made the best he could of the cramped corner it had got him into, and said with affected indifference—

"In truth, fair lady, thou givest my tongue credit for more knowledge than my whole body possesseth. I hinted that I knew the man who had broken my head, but not the strange knight who challenged and slew Sir Eustace. The one

is a very common wonder: the other must be the Devil or a miracle."

For reply Mistress Edith only laughed, and said in a mocking tone—

"By my faith, thou art a better fencer than any of them, Sir Knight! I pray thee but to ward this one thrust of mine, and I am satisfied. Tell me the name of the wonder that worsted thee in the forest, and I will give up the miracle which slew Sir Eustace. It cannot matter to tell me that, since thou sayest the two have nought in common."

The last stroke of the lady fairly brought the Knight to bay; for he reflected that, on the one hand, to speak would betray his secret, and that, on the other, silence would prove almost as fatal. In this rock-begirt strait Sir Wilfrid was driven back upon that primitive harbour of refuge, sometimes resorted to in bad weather by desperate voyagers—plain truth; and, after much curious thinking, he could see no better escape from the tangle his folly had got him into than boldly throwing himself upon Mistress Edith's mercy, and explaining to her his necessity for thus refusing what she had asked of him. Turning, therefore, to the bereaved lady with a frankness he had not yet displayed, he said earnestly—

"Truly, thou art a merciless judge, Mistress Edith, and it would take a witty prisoner to fence with thee; but I will spare thee further pains by plainly telling thee my position in this matter thou hast thus questioned me upon. Frankly, then, thou art right, and I do know the man who slew Sir Eustace; but I am bound by a most sacred oath not to reveal it, and thou must not ask me to." Then he added, with a zeal which

carried faith with it—"But do not think that I am in league with thine enemies, or that I am less thy friend in this cause of thine because I cannot help thee in it. I swear to thee that I hate the man thou seekest as much as thou dost, and that thou wilt not more willingly visit justice on him than I shall rejoice to see thee do it."

Once more Mistress Edith glanced keenly at the Knight, and then held out her hand to him.

"Be it so," she said quietly. "I thank thee for telling me the truth, and I am satisfied. I had looked to thee for help, but I am almost jealous of my vengeance, and would as lief keep the whole merit of it to myself. Thou shalt e'en be an onlooker, and witness what I will do to avenge the death of the man I loved, and who hath been so bloodily taken from me."

Here Mistress Edith showed her generalship by leaving the enemy alone, and moving off the ground with every show of a retreat, all the while her busy spies and scouts—those sharp eyes and ears of hers—were on the look out from each point of vantage, rear and front, for the first favourable opening by which the foe might be pounced upon and routed. With a heavy sigh of weariness, and looking as though the painful subject just discussed had been too great a strain for her weak powers, she turned to Sir Wilfrid, and said—

"In truth, Sir Knight, I have troubled thee enough with my poor concerns, and I am almost grown tired of them myself. I pray thee, let us talk a little of thy affairs. I am as good as out of the world since my poor Knight's death, and know nothing of what is passing there. I heard of thine

accident in the forest, but that was before what hath befallen us, and I wot not any particulars of it, nor aught that afterwards happened to thee. Methinks 'twas told me that thou wast taken to yonder Priory; and if so, I am sorry for thee, for thou must have had a weary time of it with the pious Brethen there."

"Faith, and that I had!" replied Sir Wilfrid laughing. "A more dreary company of tame faces and tamer souls it was never my luck to light upon. But for one blithe fellow, who shed a beam or two on my darkness, I must have died of the spleen. Mass, he was an oddity of a monk—a very jackdaw among crows! 'Twas but little I saw of him, though, for the Prior hath no more liking for a merry monk than I have for one of his sermons."

"I pray thee, tell me about him," said Mistress Edith with a smile. "A merry monk must be a wonder worth hearing of, and I should like above all things to have his portrait."

"Imagine, then," said Sir Wilfrid, "a body somewhat tall and very fat, with a face on the top of it like a red moon for colour and expression, save for a pair of black eyes that twinkle as brightly as any two stars. And the point of the fellow's eyes," added the Knight, laughing afresh at his remembrance of the jovial Father, "is that they bear no relation whatever to the face which owns them, for the more they sparkle, so that one would swear the man was bursting with a merry jest, the graver is that heaven of a countenance they are dancing in. Verily, they remind me best of his own jolly spirit prisoned in that dull cloister it hath to habit!"

"He must be a wonder, truly," answered Mistress Edith, again smiling, "and thou must have found him a great relief to thee in thy long banishment in that same cloister."

"Why, yes," returned the Knight: "as I told him when he first burst on me, he was like the morning sun after a dreary long night. For a while, though, he was rather sparing of his beams, being in some dread of the ghostly Prior; but I found out the way to make him shine, for, like the sun I compared him with, he hath a capacity for licking up the dew; so I persuaded him to filch a flagon from the buttery, and, by the Lord, that drew the heats in him! Thou shouldst have seen how he shone then! It was a birth, a resurrection! He laughed, and winked, and jested, and even blasphemed a little, the poor soul was so blithe at shaking those stiff wings of his, and—wouldst thou credit it of a monk in his own cloister?—verily sang me a scrap of an old hunting-song when I begged him to; which last, however, proved too much for the Prior's patience, and my jolly Frere was nearly frightened out of his wits by being caught in the very midst of our loudest chorus!"

"Fie, Sir Knight!" said Mistress Edith gravely. "It was very wrong of thee to tempt the poor Father to break his rules. Thou knowest not what plight thou mayst have tripped him into. But perchance it was his first lapse, and he may not sip the 'dew,' as thou callest it, so deeply as thou dost imagine."

"He needed not much tempting," rejoined Sir Wilfrid with a loud laugh, "nor, methinks, is his first lapse within the memory of any confessor living; and as for his thirst—I verily

believe if the Devil were to offer him a good flagon, and name his soul as the price for it, he would take the one and pay the other without cheapening."

"By our Lady," said Mistress Edith, "from thy description, Sir Knight, I will not choose him for my confessor; and the worthy Prior would do well to part him from yonder flock of his, unless he wisheth his sheep to wander."

"So the Prior said himself," replied Sir Wilfrid. "He liketh the poor monk's presence no better than thou dost his portrait; but I like him, and he made my captivity pleasant to me, so I shall not lend my voice to help damning him."

"And didst thou never meet with this miracle before?" asked the lady with an amused expression. "I marvel, Sir Knight, that so bright a star should have shone so long without thy noting it."

"Certes, we *had* met before, and our acquaintance began oddly enough," answered the Knight with another laugh. "The Reverend Father, it seems, was present when that devil of a fellow split my head for me; though I remembered not seeing him—and no wonder, since I had as little leisure to note his presence as my jolly Frere had a fancy for the fray he looked on."

"Speaking of thy accident," said Mistress Edith, who was still bent on shifting ground, "if thou wilt forgive my touching upon such a matter, I was greatly grieved to hear that the King had taken offence with thee. I trust it is no worse than a passing cloud, and that thou wilt soon be restored to his Grace's favour."

The change from Father Hubert's laughable frailties to his

own late folly, which was not at all laughable, was rather a sharp jerk for Sir Wilfrid, and he started at the reminder very much as might a dreamy man in a forest when he is suddenly made conscious of being there by an adder he has trod upon. The Knight, however, with the best air he could muster, found heart to respond—

"His Grace himself best knows whether he is angered with me for an hour or a twelvemonth. By the mass, it is not easy pleasing kings, for they blame a man to-morrow for what they did themselves yesterday, and between whiles he must look to his stepping. I am vexed to have displeased his Grace; but if I had not done so this time I might have done it another, and I mean not to plague myself with the thoughts of it."

"I did not speak of it to thee," said Mistress Edith, "out of curiosity, or to offer thee my sympathy, but to ask if I could be of any help to thee in getting thy place again. The lord Mareschal was a good friend to my poor Knight, and, moreover, I once nursed him in a troublesome boar-hurt he got in the forest here, and he was pleased to promise me any favour I liked to ask him, then or after. I doubt not, for both our sakes, he would speak to the King for thee, if I sent to make request of him."

"I thank thee much, I thank thee much," returned Sir Wilfrid warmly, "and thy kindness is enough to cure any man's wounds for him, be they from boar or monk. Maybe I will ask thee to do me this favour thou proposest, but at present I am a little sore at the King's usage of me, and inclined to wait his Grace's pleasure. But I will bring thee

word of my decision; and, whether or no, I am very grateful for thy kind thought of me."

Here the Knight rose to leave, and he had no sooner quitted the room than a great change came over Mistress Edith's face and manner. All the smiling ease or weary indifference which had marked the latter part of her interview with Sir Wilfrid fell from her like a mask, and instead there came a look of stern resolve, broken only by a smile of triumph, such as would have astonished her late companion had he returned to see it. Flinging herself on her knees before the iron effigy of her lost warrior, she laid one hand upon the fatal rent in his breast, and, with the other raised solemnly upwards, exclaimed fervently—

"Forgive me, my Knight, that I have insulted thee by laughing and jesting in thy dead presence! Thou wilt not be angry with me, for thou knowest my purpose, and that what I have done I have done for thee only, to avenge thy life and thine honour—ay, my Knight, and I have done well for thee, for I have won a thread from this false friend of thine which will lead me to that traitor which slew thee and took thy good name from thee; and now, my Knight, I will laugh no more, but we will mourn together as we are wont to do!"

Then Mistress Edith rose and went to the door, and called to the porter, who chanced to be just outside it, to come to her; and when that worthy had entered (much less embarrassed, it must be owned, in the presence of his late master's iron suit than he had been when the unfortunate Knight filled it), she said quickly to him—

"I pray thee tell me: dost thou know any of the good Brothers at yonder Priory?"

The porter stared a little at this abrupt question, but he answered readily—

"Why, yes, Mistress Edith: truly, I know most of them. There is the Reverend Father Prior himself——"

"I want not him—I wot him well enough," interrupted the lady hastily. "Tell me somewhat of the others, if thou knowest any."

"Truly, I know Brother Clement," began the porter, "and another that goeth much abroad with him, to wit, Brother Bernard, Mistress Edith. Brother Clement is one of the best of them, Mistress Edith, and he was very good to my mother, God bless him! in her last sickness; and the other is very pleasant, likewise, with the poor folk, though, indeed, he is somewhat prouder than Brother Clement is, and——"

"Never mind their manners," said Mistress Edith impatiently. "Tell me what they look like, what kind of faces and bodies they bear about with them?"

"Brother Clement is thin and pale-looking," replied the porter; "and for the other, truly, I doubt——"

When we desire to learn something he can tell us, it is better to leave a garrulous man to crack his own nut, for the sake of the kernel under the shell. For the third time Mistress Edith interrupted the porter, and in this case very likely to her great hindrance. However that may have been, she said to him rather irritably—

"Methinks we are wasting words. I will describe to thee the man I want, and thou shalt tell me if thou knowest him.

Is there a Brother in yonder House that hath a very fat body, and eyes which twinkle very brightly—as bright as any stars?" added Mistress Edith, suddenly remembering and quoting the exact language the Knight had used in his description of the jovial monk.

On his part, the porter showed instant signs of intelligence.

"That is Father Hubert!" he said promptly. "Truly, Mistress Edith, thou hast described him very well. He *hath* got eyes like stars, and, by our Lady, he is the fattest man in all the Priory."

"He is somewhat fond of good living, and more particularly of good wine—that is, for a man of his sacred calling—is he not?" asked the lady with a gravity that was in odd keeping with the subject.

This was apparently the porter's opinion, for he replied with a broad grin—

"He is fond of it for any man, Mistress Edith. If the Priory ponds were wine, I warrant he would drink the fish dry in them; and if the Prior's house were a venison pasty, he would make a ruin of it in a twelvemonth. There was never such a man for meat and drink as he is, when he hath the chance of them. Truly, were his soul in his belly, Mistress Edith, he would be the holiest monk in the monastery!"

"If I err not," resumed Mistress Edith, "thy late master, Sir Eustace, was acquainted with this same Father Hubert, and methinks had a kind fancy for him—I pray thee, was it not so?"

"Very like, Mistress Edith," responded the porter with a puzzled look, "though, truly, I never heard of it; but Sir

Eustace, God bless him! had strange fancies, and was very good to folks which kept civil tongues in their mouths—but indeed, Mistress Edith, I know not if it were so."

"I asked thee," said Mistress Edith, "because Sir Eustace hath left a small remembrance for the worthy Father, and I thought he would better like to receive it from my hands than have it sent him to yonder Priory. Canst thou find him for me, and get him to pay me a visit when it suiteth him?"

"Very easily, Mistress Edith," replied the porter. "I know a swineherd's cottage where the good Father often visiteth, and may always be heard of. If it please thee, I will go there to-morrow, and I warrant he will not be long coming to thee."

"I pray thee do so," said Mistress Edith quietly. "And tell me—we have still some of the old sack left in the cellars, have we not?"

"Plenty, Mistress Edith," answered the porter. "Sir Eustace, poor gentleman! was very fond of it; but there is a good store left, and of the best quality."

"Thou mayst tell the worthy Father, if thou likest," said Mistress Edith, "that I should be glad if he would favour me with his judgment on it. And now good night to thee, and see thou forgettest not to do this errand for me to-morrow."

Then the porter went to bed, and Mistress Edith returned to her post by the empty shell of her lost Knight, well pleased with the task she had performed for him.

CHAPTER V

A SPRING-SONG IN AUTUMN

THERE is no mention whatever in our record concerning the doings of either Bernard or the Prior between the evening of the King's tournament and the day now before us beyond a statement that the former had kept within the walls of the Priory as his Superior had commanded him, and that his health, or at any rate his spirits, had somewhat suffered in consequence; but late on the afternoon of the day in question a messenger arrived from Worcester with an important despatch for the Prior, and at the same time desiring the latter to send a trusty envoy of his own to confer with the lord Bishop; whereupon the good Prior chose Clement for the mission, and in his kindness, deeming a change would be of service to him, gave permission to Bernard to go as well; and therefore it happened, a little before dusk on the afternoon we are speaking of, that the two friends once more mounted their mules, and set off through the forest tracks on the errand appointed them. Their way properly led by the main road past Malvern Magna, but Bernard proposed that they should reach this by a bend across the forest, and Clement, nothing loath, agreed to his friend's suggestion. They had not, however, been long lost to view of the little Priory when Bernard stopped his mule, and, turning to his companion, said in an earnest voice—

"I pray thee, Clement, once more to do me a service of

thy friendship. I have been now for above a fortnight a prisoner in yonder House, and I am ignorant of what hath happened in the world beyond it. For aught I know, the friend I hold dearest may be dead or in some grievous trouble. Thou wottest whom I mean, Clement; and I tell thee I must see and speak with her before we set forward on this errand of ours."

"But how canst thou see or speak with her?" answered Clement, aghast at this new freak of his companion. "Verily, thou art the most restless spirit ever prisoned, as thou callest it, behind walls! How art thou to see a damsel at this hour, and in this fashion—thou standing out in the wide forest, and she like enough asleep in her bed by the time thou gettest within sight of her father's house? Truly, brother, we are scarce forgiven our last tripping before thou wilt get us into another, and the Prior will no longer trust us to walk together."

"I know not how, and I care not for the hour or the fashion," returned Bernard impetuously. "I tell thee I must see her; and as for the Prior—I warrant, whatever happed, he would sooner trust me with thee than with any other. Come, Clement, thou wilt not desert me at this pinch? An hour's delay will not greatly hinder us in our errand, and I will not ask thee to go with me to the lion's den. I will but put thee to the pains of waiting for me in our glade yonder, and we will kindle a fire to keep the wolves off, and—I pray thee, Clement, thou wilt do this kindness for me, wilt thou not?"

Clement, as usual, yielded to his companion's persuasion,

and the two friends once more turned their mules towards the familiar glade where Bernard and Rosamond had first met at the beginning of this history. There they dismounted, and, tying up the mules, set to work to light a fire—a precaution not unnecessary in those times, when the forest was thickly tenanted by wolves, which made the nights, and occasionally even the days, dangerous for travelling in. While this task was proceeding some conversation took place between the monks, Clement still striving to dissuade his friend from his proposed adventure, and Bernard as stoutly defending both his purpose and its good end. At last Clement said—

"Thou hast become a mystery to me, Cuthbert! I have been thy companion now for many years, and I thought that I knew thee, but verily I have failed to fathom thee. In a short month or two thou hast put on a head and shoulders which carry thee beyond my measure, and I must even fling away my rule, and leave thee to thine own shaping. Neither my counsel nor my friendship any more keepeth pace with thee, and though thou needst not doubt but I shall hobble after thee in the best fashion I am able to, and as long as thou hast breath and strength, thou wilt have to stand or fall as thine own feet shall bear thee, for I cannot follow thy present running."

"Be to me as thou hast always been, no more and no less, a true friend and a kind one," replied Bernard earnestly. "I am no mystery, Clement, no different from what I ever was and shall ever be, and for twice the worth of all I value I would not have thee, or that other dear friend of mine, to think of me or to treat me as though I were so. It is only

what hath happened to me, not myself, that seemeth different; and a man, if he stand up straightly to the deeds his fortune fetcheth him, need suffer no worse change than a rock which the waves beat over and then turn back from."

"I believe thou standest straightly enough," said Clement, "but was there any need for thee to stand at all? Thy comparison hath a great flaw in it: a rock hath no choice but to bear the brunt, and the tide must turn; but a man's deeds are in his own guiding, and assuredly thine were—ay, and are still, at least a part of them. I pray thee, brother, think of what thou hast done in the short space since we last stood here; and tell me—hath thy soul no ruth for the man thine arm hath smitten, or for the maiden thou art perchance leading to sin and sorrow?"

"Do not say that!" exclaimed Bernard sternly, and dashing down a blazing branch with so fierce an air that Clement started nervously back from him. "No man, not my dearest friend, not my father were he alive again, scarce an angel from Heaven, should say that of me and the purest maiden that breatheth this vile air of ours!—But, body of mine," he broke off as suddenly as he had begun, and tossing a fresh bough into the fire, "I will not quarrel with thee, Clement. I wot well thou meanest no offence, but thou speakest enough to strain my heart at thee. I tell thee I *am* sorry for that poor slanderer I sent to answer for the lie he fashioned, and had the evil he wrought been a less one—I would rather have died myself than have had his blood on me. Nevertheless, the deed was fair and just, and I would do it again for the same cause; and even our gentle Prior hath

found some grace for it, as witness the way he hath since treated me. No, I regret the need but not the deed," added the young Benedictine in so firm a tone that his companion gazed at him with wondering eyes. "Methinks a man, that is worth the name, should reckon with the things he doeth, or else lay no hand to them; and if villains will work wrongs on the weak they must look to be punished by the strong, or this world would be a worse Hell than the Devil hath yet managed to make it!"

Clement answered not for some moments, but continued gazing at his companion's face by the flickering flames of the fire, which shone in odd contrast with the softer light of the moon just beginning to throw its beams over the forest. Then he said in gentle tones—

"Let that pass, brother. Truly, it is done, and thy mind seemeth settled on it; and, as thou hintest, it is not for me to judge hardly what our good Prior hath been pleased to condemn lightly. If thou wilt not be angry with me, brother, I would fain ask thee of that other matter, for that is a thing yet in thine own hands—it is not beyond thy guiding. If thou art offended I will say no more, but——"

"I am not offended, and I will tell thee all I can, which is not much, and methinks thou knowest it without telling," replied Bernard with a smile. "But first," he added more gravely, "I will ask thee a question, which answer me, if thou canst, as the man Nature made thee, and not as the monk thou hast been since fashioned and now lovest to be. Thou art of a gentle, studious kind, and art content to serve God in a cell or cloister, and it is a sufficient joy to thee; but God

hath made us different, and I desire to follow Him in the wide world, with the free air blowing on me, and my hands open to the best uses He may choose for them. Methinks in that way the good in me would find a path for it, and the evil room to escape; but here, they are both turned into their wrong channels, they cross at every bend, and I am thwarted of all that God and my nature may have meant for me. Verily, I am a failure, Clement—and I shall die a failure, if Heaven stretch not soon a finger to point me a road and a remedy!"

The young monk paused awhile, deeply agitated, and then went on—

"Thou knowest my history, Clement. For no fault of mine I was taken as a young child to yonder Priory, and brought up with no end or aim beyond this—of being a monk only. No other path was made plain to me, and I knew nothing of the world's ways, or the life beyond these walls—was it any wonder that I took the vows and became what they wished to make of me? Truly, the two roads were pointed out to me, and the choice was free; but it is no choice where we have never set foot in the one, and have only trod the other in blindness, at least in darkness. Later on I learned my own heart, my own passions and desires, the path my feet burned to run along; and learned also, too late, that I could not walk happily the narrow track I had bound myself to pace in. Then I found out my mother's wrong, and that was the spark which fired my sleeping spirit, and gave play to my rusting manhood. My father's old servant, who had told me of her despite, the memory of which still clung to me, trained

me secretly in the use of arms, and that was a new and great joy to me. Well, thou knowest of that matter. Then came my meeting with the fair being thou dost now question me of. Thou rememberest by what accident I first met her, and, by our Lady, it was a revelation! I knew nothing of love and beauty save by the merest echoes, but I had felt the want of someone beyond ourselves to love and do brave deeds for, and I had no sooner seen that fair spirit than I was conscious of a new power within me which might work miracles at the pure shrine I knelt at. But I swear I knew it not then—at least, I knew it not by name; and when she pitied my poor story, and promised to be a sister to me, I vow to thee I had no other thought, no dream or imagining else, than to be a brother truly to her, and so worship her in purest fancy and fairest deeds. By Heaven, I still thought so when thou didst talk with me in this very glade on our last coming here; but after thou hadst left me, and when I chanced again to meet with her, another light flashed upon my darkness, and I then knew that I indeed loved her—loved her as a man loveth the woman he would live and die for, who would make this world a joy to him, and share with him the blessed hope of the one to follow it!"

Bernard again paused, and his companion still keeping silence, he continued earnestly—

"I tell thee, Clement, I loved her too well to be a moment false to her, and having learned my own secret, in the same breath I laid its truth bare to her—bare as I knew how to that pure heart and those sweet eyes of hers. I told her truly and without hindrance that I had broken my vow to her, that I

could no longer be the brother I had sworn to be, and that I gave her back the precious promise she had blessed me with —ay, and that I would leave her path free and cloudless, nor spoil with my shadow the bright sunshine that might fall on it, or perchance flow from it to the world around and below her. I swear to thee, Clement, I spoke from my heart's truth, and I looked for her anger to rebuke my blasphemy; but—God of Nature, that I were only free to Thy joys as others are!—I found that she loved me also, loved me as I loved her, beyond this slavish world and its poor prison-bars and vain fetterings; and when she told me that she should die if I took my friendship from her, and that she was content with that friendship as it was, and needs must ever be—then, Clement, I put my seal to our bond again, and swore that I would be true to whatsoever she might choose for me. By Heaven, I could not leave her with that cloud upon her fair face, and the tears yet unsmiled from her sweet eyes! I had done what I thought a man was bound to do—verily, I must have been an angel to have done more, and I could not, I did not, seek to do it!"

As Bernard ended speaking, Clement, who had by no means been an unaffected listener to his companion's words, held out his hand, and said fervently—

"Believe me, brother, I can both feel for thee as a man and pity thee as a priest. And now, tell me the question thou wouldst ask of me?"

"I would but ask thee to be my judge," returned Bernard quietly. "Tell me if thou thinkest I have done amiss in this matter, and if thou wouldst have done otherwise hadst thou

been in my place—ay, and what thou wouldst do now, wert thou even as I am at this present?"

Clement thought for a moment, and then said—

"I cannot answer thee as thou wouldst wish, and I love thee too well to be thy judge: therefore I had better not answer thee at all. Forgive me, brother; but I cannot measure good and evil, or sift the grains of right and wrong—no, nor reckon with joy and sorrow. To me right and wrong are in diverse scales, and the hand halteth that putteth them into one balance. Verily, I would choose the one and leave the other, trusting the joy and sorrow to the Wisdom that alone weigheth them. If our blessed hope be worth our present waiting, methinks those shifting lights repay not our eyes the watching."

"Methinks *thy* comparison hath a flaw in it as well as mine," rejoined Bernard moodily. "Life is something more than a waiting, it is a *doing* also, else what becometh of the divers talents and humours men are fashioned with? Thou wouldst have men to be nought but watchmen set on lonely towers, with nothing to watch for, while the battle is waging in a far-off plain beyond the reach either of their eyes or ears! That may be safe, brother, but it is not noble—at least, it suiteth not me. I would keep my armour burnished, and my sword bright, and go forth and meet evil like a man—ay, and conquer so much of it as I might! But we have strayed from our starting, and thou hast answered me as a monk when I asked thee to judge me as a man."

"Are we not monks, and can I judge thee by another rule?" asked Clement in a troubled tone. "As a man,

indeed, I pity thee—as a friend, my heart is sore pricked for thee; and I know that thou frettest at thy chosen course, and I am even tempted to doubt whether it was God's hand that put the yoke on thee. But while I am sorry for thee, my brother, I cannot be false to my own truth, I cannot be blind to right and wrong; and I think thou art now treading a dangerous path, both for thine own feet and those tender ones that are running with thee, and I doubt thy best armour will not shield thee from the thorns and flints thou wilt surely encounter there."

"How can I walk without thorns," exclaimed Bernard bitterly, "in the road I am at present hedged in? Whose fault is it that I have to run in the path thou speakest of? I tell thee, I am not as thou art. I have passions and ambitions which thou knowest not—which, truly, if shackled as they now are, burn out the living heart in me; but if free to will and work, might move me to better things than thou dreamest of! I tell thee, Clement, I must have love, and I cannot cast from me this precious jewel that is now shedding its bright beams for me. By Heaven, it is worth all the heaped stones of yonder dead pile of ours, and I would sooner make a ruin of that cold charnel than of the heart God was minded to give me—I doubt not for His own uses and mine also!"

Clement made no reply to this speech; but presently, as his companion was about to depart upon the errand he had resolved on, the young priest said gravely—

"I pray thee, brother, at least hearken to one counsel. Whatever thou mayst think right for thine own soul and thine own body, take good heed for this innocent heart that trusteth

in thee. I entreat thee, both as priest and man, bring no cloud upon her head, no sorrow upon her heart, which thou wouldst not choose to be brought on thine own sister if thou hadst one, which thou wouldst not thyself have brought on the sister thou didst once call her."

Bernard looked for a moment almost as his brother had seen him when that flippant knight had joined in the slander against his mother; but it was for a moment only: the next, holding out his hand to Clement, he said with deep emotion—

"I would rather die, Clement, than bring the least scath on her fair head, the least sorrow to her pure heart! We know not what we will do till the moment comes to us; but I swear to thee I will do nothing that is not free to God and man, that her own true soul approveth not, that thou thyself shalt not know of and sit in judgment on!"

With that Bernard turned from his companion, and quickly pushed through the forest brakes; while Clement stood watching him as long as he remained in sight, with a face that was dark with cloudy doubts, and thinking of him with a heart that was heavy with prophetic fears.

When the young monk reached the goal of his desires, and as he stood on the edge of the forest looking up at the windows of the rough casket which held his jewel—the moon, that old friend and confidant of lovers, rose high over the dark trees, and threw a light upon the world below well suited to the spirit of love, which is always half sad and half joyous, and in the present case was specially so. Soon the leaves of the old oaks seemed to dance a grave measure in the moonlight, and the water of the moat beyond rippled brightly

beneath the breeze-kisses, while between these the green space where the fatal lists were lately held looked spectral in the mingled shadows of light and darkness. Bernard, gazing at this scene of his late encounter, his mind excited and on the strain, almost expected to see the ghost of the stricken Knight rise up and bid him to a second and more deadly contest. The ground, though cleared of the pales and galleries, and all the outward signs of its former service, still bore the marks of the use it had been put to. The hoof-prints of the charging horses yet remained, and the holes where the posts had been deeply driven; and Bernard remembered the spot where his own struggle had begun and ended, and fancied, too—for the moonlight fell strongly there—that he could see his enemy's blood in a certain dark shadow, and marvelled if angered Heaven had forbidden the dew and rain to wash that one place clean and clear the ban from it. Presently he walked up to it, and, seeing that it was but a shadow, gravely smiled at his fearsome thought; and, kneeling on the spot, offered up a prayer both for the soul of the mother he had done the deed for, and the man who had betrayed her and afterwards died for it; and the prayer seemed to lighten his spirit. Then he moved onward towards the moat, and was surprised to find that the drawbridge was still down, and that there was no sign of life or motion in the little castle. In one chamber, however, there was a faint light burning, and he wondered if that were Rosamond's room. Anon, as he was watching it with a lover's ken, a shadow crossed the open window, and in a while a mantled head looked out upon the moonlight, and then

Bernard knew that it was Rosamond. Pondering how he might best warn her of his presence without alarming the rest of the household, he at length bethought him of that romantic expedient so common to lovers and his own time, though not, indeed, very common to plain monks—a serenade. In this design the young Benedictine was well seconded by a fine voice which had often done duty in the Priory services, and he now resolved to prove its worth in a more worldly employment. His store of secular music was not very great, but as he taxed his wits to find something to suit the hour and the subject, he suddenly remembered a little ballad which Clement, whose gentle spirit loved to stir itself in song, had once taught him; and though its theme breathed of Spring, and the present season was Autumn, Bernard thought it mattered not, and that there was enough of Spring in the hearts both of himself and his fair auditor to make it apt for any season. Returning, therefore, to the edge of the trees, and standing in the shadow of a broad oak, he sang forth in a clear but subdued voice the following stanzas, which, as in a former case, we give in the best modern dress we are able to fashion for them:—

SERENADE

The Night-wind sighs for love of thee,
And I would join its sighing:
The Night-bird flies to yonder tree,
Where he can still thy minstrel be,
And woo thee with his melody:—
Ah! me,
Love envies so his flying!

A SPRING-SONG IN AUTUMN

O breathe to me a single kiss
From out thy bosom's sighing :
It cannot be a thing amiss
For sweetest flowers to scatter bliss :
One joy in all they scarce should miss :—
I wis
That love for thee is dying !

Thou look'st from yonder chamber's height,
No more, O love, denying !
Thou lookest with thine eyes of light :
The jealous stars have taken flight,
And only thou dost help the night :—
Too bright
For feeble Nature's vying !

O joy ! Thou leav'st thine airy tower
To smile upon my sighing !
Thou bloomest on my breast, sweet flower !
And Love, who hath immortal power,
Doth touch with golden wand the hour :—
O dower
Eternal and undying !

If the song were not suited to the season, the last verse was apt to the occasion, for Bernard had scarcely ceased singing ere he saw the light figure of Rosamond tripping over the drawbridge, and the next moment she was standing by his side. For some time neither of the pair spoke, but, hand in hand, stood silently regarding one another, a mode of speech which most young lovers find eloquent enough. Presently Rosamond broke their dreams by saying timidly—

"I did not think to meet thee at this hour, brother—thou seest I cannot yet forget that name for thee; but I am glad thou hast come, for I feared thou wert in some trouble by thy long absence from our tryst yonder, and I was thinking of thee

at the very moment when I heard that sweet song of thine. But hast thou been in trouble? I pray thee, tell me truly what hath happened to thee?"

"I could not come to thee before," replied Bernard, "but my trouble, save for that, hath been a light one. I have feared thou wert in trouble also, and I could no longer bear to be in doubt of it: therefore I flew hither at my first freedom, though perchance I shall bring thee peril by my impatience."

"I am glad thou hast come," repeated Rosamond, "for I wished to speak to thee, and we shall be free for a short while, as my father hath gone on a journey, and hath taken Oswald with him, and there is none up save the porter, and he was sleeping as I passed him in the outer hall. But thy trouble—I pray thee tell me of that?" she added in an anxious tone. "Hath it not to do with thy late encounter in this clearing? And hath thy secret been discovered—is it known thou wast the Strange Champion who fought here?"

"Thou hast guessed aright," answered Bernard, "the Prior hath indeed found out my secret. But thou needst not be troubled for that: the matter is safe in his hands, and he hath judged my offence very lightly. In truth, Rosamond, I love the old man dearly, and am sorry that I am born to be such a plague to him."

"Thou art not born to be a plague to him, or to me either—why, then, wilt thou do such things?" returned Rosamond in a tone half chiding, half playful. "Thou art gentle enough with me—why must thou be so fierce with those that vex thee? Truly, brother," she continued, looking down fondly on the

hand that was clasped in hers, "I can scarce credit me that this hand which now lieth so quietly in mine should have dealt such a blow as I saw it give to that poor knight yonder. Alack, too, and the blow which he dealt to thee! I shall never forget how it made my heart tremble for thee! I pray thee, Cuthbert, why wilt thou do such things?"

"I will swear never to do so again," said Bernard earnestly, "if thou wilt promise to love me always, and also to call me Cuthbert—even as thou hast just done, and as my ears like to hear thee."

"Cuthbert, Cuthbert, Cuthbert," cried Rosamond laughing gaily—"doth that please thee, Cuthbert? Verily I will call thee so as many times as thou likest, if thou wilt but keep thy promise and be gentle. As for thy other condition—methinks there is little need to promise that, for I fear I have shown thee more plainly than a maiden should that I do love thee, and it will not be my fault if I do not love thee always."

Love's wings ever fly heavily against the future, and these last words seemed to have suddenly checked Rosamond's gaiety, for she added in a graver tone—

"But thou hast not told me how thy secret became known, and how the Prior discovered thee to be the Strange Challenger?"

If the Future oppressed Rosamond, the Past clouded Bernard, and he answered with a dark frown—

"Who would do it save one? What enemy have I but the man that should most be my friend? It was my brother who hinted to the Prior that I had fought in the King's lists, else had it ever remained a secret."

"Thy brother is a base Knight," exclaimed Rosamond, a little unmindful of her peaceful precepts in her indignation at Sir Wilfrid's treachery, "and he is thine enemy in another matter also, and it was of that I wished to speak with thee and to ask thy counsel. Since I saw thee he hath been here, and hath made his peace with my father, and, moreover, hath had the insolence to ask for my hand in marriage; and when I told him that I regarded him not with favour, but looked upon his offer as an insult—by our Lady, he showed me the kind of man he is; and I wondered," went on Rosamond, with a shy look at her companion, "how thou couldst be a brother of his, for indeed thou art no more like him than the sun is like a cloud that hideth it."

"It was well I was not there," said Bernard fiercely, "or I might have broken our promise ere it was fashioned. He is my brother, but I fear I should have forgotten it! Hath he ventured, then, to insult thee a second time?"

"No, he dared not treat me lightly in my father's house, and knowing me to be my father's daughter," replied Rosamond, "but he was vexed at my plain dealing with him, and spake as a true knight would be ashamed to speak; and I was vexed, likewise, at the freedom my father had given him, for by some means he hath won my father's favour—and truly," she broke off desperately, "I know not what to do, for if my father bringeth him to the house I cannot help seeing him, and if he cometh often, as I fear he will, folks are like to say that I am to be given to him—though indeed I would rather die or take the veil than be forced to wed him!"

Bernard's face grew yet darker as he listened to his

companion's words. For the first time he knew the meaning of jealousy, and though it pricked him with a light hand, since its fair object herself did not wield the weapon, he none the less started restively under its touch, and had his brother been present it might have gone ill with the late treaty made with Rosamond and gentleness. The girl was quick to notice the look of anger in him, and, pressing his hand, she said softly—

"Thou needst not be so troubled with this matter. Neither my father nor thy brother, nor all the world, can alter the bond between us, and I did not tell thee this to make thee angry, but to ask thy counsel. I pray thee, Cuthbert, seek no quarrel with thy brother. Not even for thy love would I stir up strife betwixt you."

"Have no fear," rejoined Bernard. "He hath provoked me twice already, and I did not forget the blood between us. So long as thou smilest, all the world's frowns matter not. But tell me," he continued thoughtfully, "doth thy father favour thy union with Sir Wilfrid Alderic? Knowing what he doth of him, and the common opinion he is held in, and, moreover, his late disgrace with the King, it seemeth strange that he should choose him for a daughter he regards so tenderly as he doth thee."

"My father," replied Rosamond in a doubtful voice, "saith that he is very poor, and that Sir Wilfrid is a good match for me, and that he is assured he will mend his ways after he is wedded; and when I grew angry, and I fear spake more warmly than became me, he said that he wished not to force the matter upon me, and that I was free to choose the Knight or not; but since then he hath more strongly urged me to it,

and thy brother hath again been to see him; and verily," added Rosamond with a bewildered look at Bernard, "I know not how the thing will end, nor how I am to escape this net that is laid for me."

Bernard gazed gloomily at Rosamond as he answered—

"By Heaven, were I but free of this monk's dress, I know how I would end it for thee!" Then he said—"It befitteth me not to speak a word either against one of thy blood or mine own, but thy father can have little regard for thy happiness to give thee to so poor a protector of women as my brother hath proved himself."

"I pray thee, do not blame my father," said Rosamond sadly. "Indeed, Cuthbert, he knoweth thy worth, for he told me himself that he preferred thee to thy brother, and that hadst thou only worn spurs instead of sandals, he would gladly have chosen thee before him."

The young Benedictine had never felt his bonds press so heavily on him as he did at that moment. Flinging himself free from Rosamond's gentle hold, he exclaimed passionately—

"A monk, a monk—it is a monk always! Am I never to be free of this black burden? By Heaven, I cannot turn my head, nor move hand or foot, no, nor speak free word, but I am stopped by that accursed chain, and dragged back again to prison and darkness! Better to be a slave indeed, and blind to hope and freedom, than to have license to look on liberty but no leave to touch or taste of it! I am a slave without a slave's remedy! A free man banished—not to the world, truly, but to all within it which maketh a life and a desire of it! Verily, if I call on Heaven to find fitting work

for the soul it fashioned, that black cloud cometh between its beams and me; and if I stretch forth my hand to the Earth which bare me, it, too, shrinketh from me at the sight of this shadow that ever runneth along with me! Even now," went on the young monk in tones trembling and broken by his passion, "when the gates of Paradise are half opened to me, and I see all within them that a man might live and die for —ay, and which might lead him to the brighter light beyond them—they are shut-to again with the same despairing cry— 'Begone, thou art a monk, these treasures are not for thee!'"

Pity is the key that unlocks a woman's heart if key there be to fit it, and Rosamond's heart flew open at the sight of her companion's sorrow, and she would have given all her world to make a joy of it and to bring him comfort. Laying her hand gently on his arm, she said in winning tones—

"I pray thee, do not think of these things—at least, forget what grieveth thee when thou art with me, Cuthbert. *I* will not shut the gates on thee thou speakest of, *I* think not of thee as a monk, *I* will never remind thee of what thou likest not—no, nor ever put that dark shadow between our friendship, though all the world else would fold it round thee! I pray thee, Cuthbert, only be happy with me, and thou wilt make me happy also, and let us leave this dreaded cloud to its own shaping."

"I am not worthy of thee," answered Bernard, kneeling at her feet and covering her hands with kisses. "See what a poor coward and vain boaster I verily am! Though I know all my sum, I dare not sit down and reckon it! Thou biddest

me be happy with thee—ah! how happy could I be with thee, the only angel that hath ever pointed me to happiness—the only happiness I have ever known—ay, or ever shall know! But how—Rosamond, my sister, my love—can we be happy together in this world which is all leagued to spoil or hinder us? Truly, I told thee I should bring a cloud on thee, and it hath even now begun to fall. I cannot ask thee—I would not wither thy sweet flower beneath my shadow, for to bring sorrow to thy gentle heart were indeed a curse beyond my bearing! Yet thou wilt be given to another! I shall see the blessing which might not circle me crown some other happy head, which perchance may wear it worse than mine would have done, and verily I know not how to bear that any better! Thou seest, Rosamond, how selfish I am. Canst thou not spurn me from thee with the scorn my fault meriteth, and send me back to yonder cloister as I came to thee—void-hearted and empty-handed—where, if I may not worship thee, at least I can still think of thee and pray for thee?"

"Thou knowest that I cannot," returned Rosamond in a low voice. "I love none but thee, and I loved thee from the first; and I am selfish as thou sayest thou art, for I would give all the world for my love of thee, and I desire but to share thy fate, be it sorrow or be it joy; and if it be even as dark as thou hintest—verily, it would be yet darker if thou wert lost to me, for indeed thou hast my heart, and my life and death also are gone with it into thy keeping! I pray thee, Cuthbert, dost thou love me as I love thee?"

Bernard bowed his head over the fair hands he held, as though he felt the weight of the trust that had fallen on him.

Clement's words yet rang in his ears, and he replied with a voice full of emotion—

"I do love thee, Rosamond, my love—the only love I have ever known—so dearly, so deeply, that Heaven and my heart can answer that I, also, would rather die than be parted from thee—yea, the mere thought of it is pain and madness! But it would ill-become my father's son—it would ill-become me—to lead thee into a path thou knowest not—thou, the daughter of an honoured knight, and I——the thing I am and must ever be!" broke off Bernard bitterly, and without uttering the name he hated. Then, mastering his emotion, he added—"Verily, in the old days before the Normans spoiled our customs for us, our fathers were priests and married wives, and even monks were not galled with the chain that fettered them; but now that is all passed and changed, and to serve Heaven a man must put off the suit which God fashioned for him, for God's work is not thought good enough for God's worship. By the Rood, though," he went on passionately, "it is good enough for me, and methinks I could better serve the Lord that made me, and that gave me a heart to love as well as a soul to worship, with such a voice as thine to sing His praise with me, such feet as thine to walk His paths with—ay, and God knoweth I could love thee as truly as He hath attuned my heart to do without missing a note of His sacred music—nay, methinks my music would be the sweeter and clearer!"

The young Benedictine paused for a while, still pressing his face over the hands he held, as though his emotions were too strong for speech. Presently, in a tone of deep gloom, he said—

"But it is in vain, it is all in vain: we are in man's hands, and it is man that judgeth us—man alone, who hath made the laws and then added God's seal to them! God made me what I would be, and men have fashioned me what I am; and I love thee, Rosamond, I love thee better than I love life, or Earth—almost than I love Heaven; and I would cast men's judgment to the world's winds for thee—ay, and would serve thee truly to the black-paled lists of Death himself; but for thee—verily thou art different, and thou hast more to lose than I—I cannot ask thee to brave the world's frowns for me—by all that is holy, I love thee too well to bring sorrow on thy fair head or shame to thy pure heart!"

A deep silence, only broken by the rustling of the breeze-stirred leaves and the far-off cry of a restless owl, fell upon the scene and the lovers—a silence well-suited, like the heavy breathing before a tragedy, to fill the gap of a great decision. It was at length ended by Rosamond, who, bending her head above her still-kneeling companion, whispered in low tones—

"I love thee, Cuthbert, and my heart will not deem its service shame, and my head is ready to bear its burden—else were my love not worthy of thee."

Whether it were the rustling leaves, or the dancing moonlight, or the elvish laughter of the wicked Forest, which still whispered its mad music in the lovers' ears—whatever may have been the cause, a flush of wild joy sprang into Bernard's face, as, uplifting it at last, and meeting his companion's eyes with his own glowing glance, he said eagerly—

"Wilt thou indeed—I pray thee speak to me, Rosamond,

my love—nay, my more than love, my guide and angel for this world and all that cometh after it!—knowing what thou knowest, what I have told thee, what thine own heart can better tell thee, and what the pride and cruelty of men perchance will make yet plainer to thee—wilt thou indeed be the partner of my poor path, the sharer of my joys and sorrows? Wilt thou truly sail with me in these rough seas? Art thou willing to throw so much behind thee for the little that lieth before thee—the doubtful treasure I can point to and haply win for thee? Verily, I would have thee think well ere thou steppest—both for thine own sake, and that I, too, though I may not have courage enough to refuse this precious joy thou offerest, shall at least have shown thee the perils thy tender feet are like to hazard." Then, in a faltering voice, he continued—"Thou knowest, Rosamond, my poor case, and the chains which circle me; and that were I the proudest king I would gladly lay my jewelled sceptre at thy feet, nor deem myself crowned until thy sweet smile had fallen on me! But thou knowest what I am, and that I can only offer thee—God forgive the hands which put it there!—a knight's heart under a monk's gown. Verily, Rosamond, that is all, though Heaven wotteth my heart will be as true to thee as if man's seal were added to God's wax! I pray thee, then, deal with me as thy soul willeth, and I swear to bend to thee even as thou shalt choose for me—yea, as freely as yonder boughs to the wind which bloweth them!"

Rosamond answered nothing, beyond bending her head yet a little lower over her lover's neck, and pressing his hand a little closer in her own; and Bernard went on—

"Choose for me, Rosamond, my only love, for it is thy fate that is in the judgment—mine I value not save for thy sake and for thy sweet service which I am bound to. Dost thou indeed wish to walk in my path? Art thou indeed willing to give up all for that one worship? Wouldst thou truly be my wife, as this world will not let thee be, but as God and Heaven in their kinder wisdom may perchance give thee leave to be—ay, and bless our union, and seal it, and smile on it, for the sake of the pure flame their own blessed fires have kindled? If it be even so, God be my witness that I will serve thee faithfully, and with a true heart—ay, verily, until death—ay, and beyond it—yea, for ever! But I pray thee, Rosamond—my once sister, now my love—would that I might call thee my bride also!—if thy soul the least doubteth, if thy heart trembleth in its choosing, or thy feet fear their stepping—then, for both our sakes, speak and tell me so, and bid me fly for ever from this fair Paradise I have strayed in—nay, I know not but it is the better choice for thee!—and if my heart cannot freely obey thee, my feet at least shall not falter in their fleeing—I will be to thee as though I had not been, I will pass from thee as though I had never come to thee, for God and our Lady will help me to do aright by thee!"

Then, in the stillness of night and the great forest, Rosamond's answer came, soft and low as befitted a young maid's secret, and Nature's pure ear as well, that alone beside her lover was there to listen to it—

"I know not if I be right or wrong—I know but that I love thee; and I would choose thy path for my path, thy joy

for my joy, thy sorrow for my sorrow—ay, and if it must be, thy shame for my shame. God and my mother forgive me if I am wrong, but I love thee, Cuthbert, and I cannot choose but give all the world for thee!"

After that the Forest might laugh as it liked at the maze its own magic had fashioned, and the leaves might rustle as plaintively as they pleased, and the breeze make sad music among the oak-boughs, and the moonlight dance and stir the shadows, and Nature sigh her heart out, and all the world weep or jest as its soul moved it; for the two lovers walking forth into the open glade again, with the clear sky above their heads and the bright turf beneath their feet, leaving all the darkness behind them—like glad spirits slipping free from Fate's girdle—cared for none of these things, nor indeed for aught in Earth or Heaven save the two beating hearts they carried with them, and these, moreover, made but one after their reckoning.

So the Spring-song went forth on the Autumn breezes, to fare as it might in that season which was not meant for it; and Bernard went back to the glade where he had left Clement, who, it is to be feared, might have been devoured many times by prowling wolves so far as his companion had given any thought to him, or to that errand which the Prior, in his innocence, had imagined to be the prime object of this eventful night.

But if Spring chose to sing its song in Autumn, Autumn claimed the right to add a stave to it; for as Rosamond was about to cross the drawbridge she was suddenly startled, and the pleasant dreams were roughly driven from her thoughts,

by the apparition of the old Knight her father leaning against the outer gate and regarding her with looks which boded no very happy ending to the night's sweet concert.

"Tell me, child," he said sternly, "what art thou doing in the forest at this time of night? I thought thou hadst been in thy bed these two hours—ay, faith, these three hours gone. I like not such doings, and thou knowest it! Say, child, what prompted thee to this mad prank of thine?"

"I could not sleep," answered Rosamond timidly, "and the moon shone so brightly—truly, it seemed like the day, and I thought thou wouldst not mind my walking forth a little, and——"

"Thou didst it—faith, that is the tale all told!" broke in Sir Edmund impatiently. "Methinks, Rosamond, thou art grown over-fond of this same forest. I marvel thou wast not afraid of being eaten by the wolves, or of meeting that poor enemy of thine, Sir Wilfrid, of whom thou professest so much terror. Tell me, child—what wouldst thou have done if thou hadst crossed with him, with the monks all at roost in yonder Priory? I warrant thou wouldst have wished thyself back in thy bed again, and out of that pretty moonlight which tempted thee!"

Rosamond blushed, even beyond help of the faithful moonlight to hide for her, at this allusion to her late companion, and she could only stammer in faint tones—

"I am sorry thou art angered with me, father. In truth, I thought not to meet with Sir Wilfrid Alderic, nor indeed with any one—that is——"

"Save only with his brother, the monk, and he reckoneth

not as any one?" said the old Knight, so sharply and suddenly that Rosamond started and almost fell in her surprise at the question put to her. Her father watched this emotion with a keen interest, and then added—"Answer me truly, Rosamond. Was it not the monk, Sir Wilfrid's brother, that was with thee in the forest yonder?"

It is sometimes the first blow that settles a combat, whether of soul or body—after which we either sit quiet in our corner till the time-call is past, or fight all the harder, according to the mettle Heaven has given us. Gentle natures have the gift of resistance; and Rosamond, her first shock over, nerved herself to the battle her father had offered her in a way which rather surprised that veteran. The battle itself was not altogether a new one—at least, it had long been prepared for, not less surely because unconsciously. The father and daughter loved each other tenderly enough, as Nature had settled that they should do; but there was little sympathy in the bond, and without sympathy Nature's most absolute decrees are apt to be obeyed indifferently. If we read our Chronicler aright, the old Knight had consumed almost the whole oil of his affection on the one love that had been lost to him, and his lamp, if not gone out, burned with a feeble flame, scarce sufficient to light other feet than his own. Moreover, after this final eclipse of his hopes—to complete our comparison—he had walked much in darkness, that is to say, much alone, and darkness may either make us very bold or very distrustful; while as regarded Rosamond, he was wellnigh a stranger to her, that small reminder of his loss having been sent when yet a child to a distant convent, only

to return in her budding maidenhood, and consequently he knew but little of her nature or its special needs. His scheme of uniting her with so substantial a knight as Sir Wilfrid Alderic he thought a fine piece of planning, and he was greatly fretted by what he considered a mere freak of fancy, the girl's refusal of that most suitable suitor. At first, indeed —for he had not forgotten all the lessons which his former campaigns had taught him—he forbore to press the matter, and gave her what is vulgarly called "rope"; but having once set his mind on a thing, the old Knight loved his way as well as King or Primate, and he soon began to urge the match in more decided terms, and, despite his daughter's protests, to hint at a possible extreme exercise of his parental powers. At the present juncture, having recovered herself from her first surprise, Rosamond turned to her father, and in answer to his sudden question said simply—

"It was Cuthbert Alderic whom I met, father, but I knew not that he was to be here, and I saw him by chance from my window."

"Did he come by chance also?" asked Sir Edmund irritably. "And was it chance, too, which made thee leave thy room to go and meet him in the forest—thou a maiden, and alone, at this hour?"

"I have not seen him since his late peril, and I could not let him pass our house without speaking to him, after all he hath done for us," pleaded Rosamond in a low voice. Then she said more firmly—"Methinks, father, no maiden need fear to trust herself with Cuthbert Alderic."

"So it seemeth," retorted the old Knight dryly; "but

I choose not that my daughter should trust herself with any man in my absence and after nightfall, and I trust not these monks more than other men. Tell me truth, child—thou hast not been silly enough to fall in love with him?"

Rosamond could not escape the confusion which this abrupt demand brought her, but she replied as steadily as she was able—

"Truly, father, he is the noblest man I have seen, and he is worthy of any maiden's friendship, and thou thyself hast said so; but——"

"But what? Finish the 'but,' child, and make an end of it," exclaimed Sir Edmund with still more impatience—"but what, I pray thee?"

"Thou didst say that he was out of our reckoning," said Rosamond, speaking almost in a whisper; and then she added quickly—"Indeed, father, I have told thee all I can: give me leave, now, to go to my chamber."

"Thou must stay a moment longer in the moonlight thou so much likest," returned the old Knight coldly, "for I have a word or two yet to speak to thee. Thou sayest rightly that this Cuthbert Alderic, as thou callest him, is out of my reckoning; but I know not so surely if he be out of thine, and, by the Lord, I will have no scandal to come upon the name which my fathers left me! If thou lovest the monk in truth—albeit I can scarce credit thee with such a folly—thou mayst cure thyself of the whim as quickly as thy wits will let thee, for it is a matter will only bring thee shame and me sorrow, and God wotteth I would sooner have thee dead, and myself also! By our Lady, though," he went

on in a less harsh tone, "I have a better remedy for thee in the good husband—for I tell thee, Rosamond, he is good, spite of some few faults he hath, and thou wilt find it so when thou knowest more of him—that I have got for thee; and indeed, child, thou must e'en make up thy mind to think well of him, for I assure thee 'tis a thing settled, and if it were not——" Here the old Knight dropped his mask of mildness, and said sharply—"Truly, child, thou hast now put to flight any doubts that may have halted me, and I mean to have thee wedded to Sir Wilfrid without hindrance, ay, and as soon as may be compassed."

Rosamond once more showed that gentle natures can be stubborn in their defence, when fairly brought to bay; and it was in a firm voice, and with a resolute bearing, that she made answer—

"I will never wed Sir Wilfrid Alderic, father—I will never perjure my lips with vows to a man I hate and despise! A thousand times I will die first! If thou draggest me like a slave to the altar—ay, and bindest me there with cords—I will not do it, and I will defy any priest of God to profane his sacred office by so foul a sacrilege!" Then, having reached the high peak of her passion, and a little toppled over it, she added in faltering tones—"But why wilt thou force me to what my heart hateth? If thou art so anxious to be rid of me, or fearest that I shall bring some sorrow on thee, why wilt thou not send me to a convent? Surely, father, I should be safe enough there, and beyond the fear of troubling thee."

"I desire not to be rid of thee," replied Sir Edmund, a little

shaken by the girl's firmness, "nor do I doubt thee, and I have no mind to send thee to a convent; but I do wish to see thee wedded to Sir Wilfrid, and 'tis for thine own happiness; and I like not thy friendship with this monk his brother, which thy marriage would put an end to; and—by the mass," continued the old Knight, speaking more to himself than to Rosamond, "methinks that were safer than a convent."

"I will not—I cannot wed Sir Wilfrid, father," repeated Rosamond desperately, "but I will obey thee in all else—indeed, indeed, I desire not to vex thee nor to give thee trouble. I have told thee of my friendship for his brother, but I will promise never to see him again—or, at least, but once only, and in thy presence—if thou wilt also promise that I shall not be made to wed this Sir Wilfrid Alderic—no, nor any other, for indeed I wish not to wed at all," broke off Rosamond, bursting into tears and seizing her father's hand, which she kissed passionately. "I pray thee, father, let me stay with thee always as I am now, and I will not trouble thee, nor do the least thing to give displeasure to thee!"

The old Knight looked at her for a while, as if in doubt how to decide, and once more this history was in danger of losing its place among the records of the World's deeds; but the next moment he mastered whatever present softness, or memory of past tenderness, had stirred in him, and, turning from the weeping girl, said sternly—

"Thou *dost* give me displeasure, Rosamond, and thou art in greater peril than thou thinkest. I promise thee, I will have no prowling monks round my doors; and I have found

an honourable match for thee, such as any maiden, the very proudest, might be pleased with; and I mean thee to be pleased with it, or I will know who is master of my own daughter. Thou mayst go now to thy room, where thou wouldst have been this long while since, if thou hadst had any regard for thy maidenly prudence; and—hark thee, Rosamond—dost thou hear me?—thou shalt e'en stop there till thou goest forth to meet Sir Wilfrid Alderic! By the mass, I will have it so, and look that thou forgettest not thy duty this time!"

Then Rosamond, still weeping, and downcast as a dashed flower, moved slowly towards the dark house, and out of the sweet moonlight that seemed to follow her like a friend—like a friend, though, that had to visit her on the sly, and which dared not enter those frowning doors with her, but rather chose to run back again over the dewy green, and climb up the wide heaven, and peep in at the window of her chamber, where they would be free enough to whisper secrets and exchange confidences, and maybe to talk of Bernard and that night's strange doings, and above all of that night's strange concert, which had opened with such a burst of harmony and had closed with such a blast of discord.

CHAPTER VI

THE WHISPERS OF WINE

The porter had lost no time in discovering Father Hubert and delivering to him Mistress Edith's message, the latter part of which he hinted with such effect that the jolly priest signified his pleasure to visit the lady on the first opportunity. This, however, both to his own and Mistress Edith's impatience, did not occur very promptly, nor was it before an afternoon a full week after the above summons that Father Hubert found himself seated in the same bower-room which had lately welcomed his unwitting sponsor, Sir Wilfrid Alderic.

When Mistress Edith first set eyes on her visitor she would scarcely have believed, had it not been for the twofold witness of Sir Wilfrid and her porter, that any gems of worldly gaiety sparkled beneath so grave a crust as the burly Father's countenance. It was true that his body was very fat and his complexion very ruddy—that part of the portrait Mistress Edith at once recognised; but she had known many holy men, and monks also, who were both fat and ruddy, and his expression, though she had been warned of it, had altogether too serious a cast to suggest levity, and above all—and that Mistress Edith noted particularly—there was no sign of any twinkle in either of his eyes, which shone, if indeed such a term could be properly applied to them, as calmly and unexcitedly as the lights on his own Priory altar. Whether they

ever really twinkled, and, if so, whether she herself would ever succeed in working that wonder in them, was a question at present beyond her answering. On his side, the portly ecclesiastic did not help her speculations by uttering a single word, but regarded her in patient silence, and with a look of mild beneficence which was a little embarrassing, but was assuredly in keeping with the sacred abode he was presumed to have just stepped from. Finding that her visitor had no mind to begin any discourse by himself, Mistress Edith determined to break the ground as well as she was able, and, turning to him, she said with a pleasant smile—

"I sent for thee, Reverend Father, because I believe thou wast well acquainted with the late Knight Sir Eustace Devereux, whose armour thou seest lying there. At least, unless I am much mistaken, he was a friend of thine, and held thee highly. Is it not true, Father, that he had a kind regard for thee?"

To the best of his belief, Father Hubert had never seen the late Knight: sure he was that he had never spoken with him, much less been a friend of his—he had simply heard of him, and that not very greatly to his good; but he saw that Mistress Edith had a mind to make them acquainted, and he resolved to take his cue from her, not knowing what advantage might come of it. Therefore, without any change of expression in his face, but with a slight twinkle in his eyes, a hopeful gleam which Mistress Edith at once noted and took heart at, he made answer to her—

"Truly, my daughter, I knew him very well, and a good knight he was, ay, and man, too; and none mourneth him—saving, indeed, his own house and kin—more than do I, whom,

as thou sayest, he was pleased to call his friend. Nevertheless, daughter, it becometh us not to mourn over-greatly for him, since he hath changed a very troublous world" — here Father Hubert spoke sincerely, being himself much exercised by the life he led—"for what we trust will prove a far sweeter one, and I pray Heaven to make his soul content with it!"

This speech was very useful as a sort of neutral ground—almost as safe as, and of more value than, silence—for it enabled either party to view the other without coming closer than suited: Mistress Edith, who guessed the amount of friendship which had been between her Knight and the monk, could now obtain a glimpse of the latter; while, for his part, the burly priest, being on the scent of something good to himself, was perhaps not unwilling to let her lift so much of his window-blind, only in a way that satisfied his peculiar fancy. The lady, however, often made the mistake of letting her impetuosity run away with her, leaving to her wit and will the subsequent troublesome task of getting her back again and recovering the ground lost. In the present case she committed the imprudence of over-judging the worthy Father's weakness, and consequently of scaring that cautious turtle back into the water before she had had time to catch it and filch the fat from it. Running towards her desire, therefore, by the quickest road, but the one most beset with stumbles, she said suddenly—

"Then, since thou wert a friend of his, thou wilt be willing to help me against his enemies—wilt thou not, Reverend Father? Thou hast doubtless heard," she added quickly, as though herself struck by the abruptness of this proposal, "that

Sir Eustace was challenged and done to death by a strange knight at the King's tournament. That knight, that false knave rather, I have good cause to believe was a common monk, who for some reason, which I know not yet, did this bloody deed he hath compassed—very like by the aid of magic, for I wot that such a fellow could not have slain Sir Eustace without other craft than mortal weapons; but be that as it may, I have sworn to avenge my Knight's death, and, knowing thou wert a friend of his, I sent for thee to ask thy help and counsel; for thou art a monk also, and a man of shrewd wits, and if thou canst find this fellow for me—I promise thee, I will not be ungrateful."

During this speech Father Hubert's face underwent a slight, but for him significant, change—his eyes ceased to twinkle, and that was a sign in him which proved more than any weather-cock. They indeed became dull as any other part of his countenance, and when this happened those in his company might be sure that there were clouds in his heaven—that the soul in him was not comfortable. His tongue, however, presently resolved itself, and in somewhat cold tones, very different from those he had begun with, he said to the bereaved lady—

"Truly, daughter, our office is one of peace and not vengeance: we are enjoined to heal wounds, not to make them. I assure thee I know none that cometh near thine account, and there is no monk of my acquaintance that would dare to handle a sword, let alone to fight with one. Methinks, daughter, thou must be mistaken, and that the man thou seekest is some other than thou deemest him."

"I tell thee, Father, I am not mistaken," rejoined Mistress Edith a little sharply, "save in thinking that thou wouldst help me, and I believe thou couldst help me if thou wert willing to. I ask thee to do no vengeance, no, nor to stir hand or foot in the matter, but only, if thou art able, to give me a name; and I would reward thee as no monk was ever yet guerdoned, so that, if thou hadst a mind to, thou mightest build a Priory, and get thyself made Prior of it, or—do what thou wert best pleased to do," broke off the lady, suddenly bearing in mind the description she had had of her thirsty visitor, and trusting that the temptation of unlimited "dew" might prove too much for his present scruples.

For one moment, indeed, Father Hubert's eyes twinkled responsively, but almost in the same instant returned to the cloudy vapours which had been veiling them. The hinted reward did tempt him, but the remembrance of the Prior's whispered warning frightened him yet more; so that, after a brief struggle between desire and prudence, he replied stolidly—

"I assure thee, daughter, I know nothing of what thou askest me, and as for the gift thou hintest at—verily, it becometh not mine office to receive such favours; but I assure thee," repeated the monk with the most impenetrable look that Mistress Edith had ever seen on a human face, "I know nothing of this matter, and I can tell thee nothing of it."

Now it is a commonplace that love, or revenge, or any strong passion, quickens the wit and nerves the will as a grindstone sharpens steel, for it is always on the move, and the opposed blade becomes keener with every turn. Mistress

Edith, who was both shrewd and resolute, had got it firmly into her head that Father Hubert *could* tell her what she wanted, were he but willing to do so, and she made up her mind to pluck the secret from that great body of his ere he left the room, or she would humbly own herself to her dead Knight as the veriest bungler that ever stirred hand to spoil business. So far the bereaved lady had been a bungler, and she was aware of it: she had shut her oyster's mouth by pecking at it before it was well opened; but she now resolved to make up for her fault by copying the art of those elegant little coast-flyers, the Sea-pyes, who, having found out that their favourite prey the oysters, or more commonly the limpets, unlock the doors of their chambers only at certain seasons, have the wisdom to await that opportunity—to wit, the turning of the tide—and Mistress Edith felt assured that this huge oyster of hers would open his mouth wide enough when the ocean which she would presently provide for the occasion began to flow to him. Faithful to her new plan, however, she determined if possible to remove the doubts she had conjured in her visitor's mind, and henceforth to work gradually. With this intent she stared somewhat wildly at him, and, pressing her hands over her head as though she were in pain, burst into a passionate fit of sobs, while she exclaimed in excited tones—

"I pray thee to forgive me, Reverend Father, for having offended thee; but indeed I fear my lord's death hath made me mad, since I fancy every one I meet knoweth the hand that slew him, and I thought thou mightest have done so, as my Knight was a friend of thine—at least, I judged him

to have been thy friend because he hath left a small bequest for thee—why I know not, Reverend Father, but he hath put it into fair writing, which I will presently show to thee; and I trust thou wilt make an exception to thy rule and accept this gift from him, as indeed it was his last wish to remember thee."

This shot of Mistress Edith hit the mark even fairer than she herself had aimed it to do, for Father Hubert had really begun to doubt whether the lady were not perhaps mad; and it moreover explained his supposed friendship with the deceased Knight, of which his hostess, it now appeared, only judged by the legacy, and this made it the easier for the jolly monk, whose eyes twinkled afresh at the thoughts of it, to pocket the present. The legacy itself certainly puzzled him a little, but during his priestly career he had been engaged in many rather uncanonical offices, and he reflected that it might have some time happened that, without knowing it, he had done the Knight a service, and that the latter had remembered it and taken this means of showing his gratitude. At any rate, the worthy Father answered Mistress Edith with such an increased unction both of voice and manner that that anxious lady began to have good hope that the tide was indeed upon the turn.

"Truly, my daughter, thou hast not offended me, and I pray thee do not distress thyself with any thoughts of it," he said in the soothing tones he deemed suited to the lady's state; "and as for the small present thou speakest of, verily, though I have never before done such a thing" (and this was true, as the "thing" had never before happened to him),

"yet for the sake of my dear friend, the poor Knight that is lost to us, and as thou thyself desirest it—methinks I may even do as thou hast said, and make an exception to my rule of denial. Say no more, my daughter: I will e'en stretch a point, and accept this present; and I can say masses for our departed friend's soul in satisfaction of it."

Mistress Edith concealed the joy she felt at her visitor's complaisance, only saying—

"Thou makest me glad, Reverend Father, by yielding to this request of mine; and not mine only, but that, too, of my dead lord, whose last wishes I desire to show respect to." Then she added—"I trust, also, thou wilt consent to take some refreshment ere thou settest forth again. Nay, do not refuse me, Reverend Father. It is hard travelling in the forest, and I have an excellent pasty of venison, and some sack which the King himself would not deem indifferent. I pray thee, let me send for them. Were my Knight alive, I wot he would not forgive me if I let thee go without pressing on thee the best his house could offer thee."

Father Hubert's eyes twinkled very luminously, so that the clouds could no longer conceal their brightness; but his tongue severely rebuked their levity, as he replied in a grave voice—

"I thank thee, daughter, I thank thy kindness greatly, but our rules permit us not to indulge in these carnal fancies, save, it may be, on occasions of special need, and I doubt the present is not quite convenient. I would gladly taste thy pasty, which I make sure is excellent, and thy sack, which I have before heard the praise of—but indeed, it may not be, my daughter. These poor creatures are comfortable enough,

truly, but it becometh us to deny their conversation, and indeed, daughter, I may not hold discourse with them."

"But what can be more convenient," said Mistress Edith with her pleasantest smile, "than to refresh a good priest such as thou art with the best gifts Heaven sendeth us? And, certes, the sack is of the best, being the very same Sir Eustace had laid down for his own using. And besides, Reverend Father," she went on, with an air of aggrieved hospitality, "thou wilt greatly disappoint me by thy refusal, for I had hoped thou wouldst have brought a blessing to the house by partaking of its poor bounties."

The monk's eyes fairly danced as he listened to the lady's description of her Knight's sack, and his tongue no longer rated them for their vanity. It was, indeed, in a milder, and altogether less positive, voice that he answered—

"Nay, my daughter, if it should offend thee—our Lady judge me, I would not be a hindrance to any soul, and if I thought——"

"I should be offended, and it would be a hindrance to me," returned Mistress Edith promptly, "for I had the pasty made ready, and the best sack drawn, for thine occasion, and it is vexing to see a guest depart without touching what was prepared for him. Moreover, Reverend Father," she continued, looking at him with thoughtful solicitude, "I can see that thou art somewhat wearied with thy journey, and thou art not strong enough to walk further on a fasting stomach."

"It is true, I think I am a little fatigued," said Father Hubert doubtfully. "Well, be it even as thou wilt, daughter;

I will make this exception, also, to do thy pleasure; but I pray thee, it must be but a taste of the pasty, a whet of the sack merely, and then I must go forth to my sacred duties."

Having thus, as one may say, got a glimpse of the shore and the flowing tide, Mistress Edith lost no time in urging forward that ocean wherewith she hoped to open the secret chamber of her fat oyster—to wit, in a very short while the jolly monk was seated before as fine a venison pasty as he had ever been called to do duty to, and a supply of the best sack which even his devout stomach could piously boast of having converted itself into a shrine for. At first Father Hubert was modest, or at least cautious, in his worship of his favourite deity; but presently, yielding to the immortal impulse which stirred him, he quaffed off his goblet at a single draught, saying with a satisfied smile as he did so—

"In truth, daughter, thy Knight was a good judge of sack! I vow 'tis the best I ever tasted, and it doth him great credit in the choosing. But, Heaven forgive me!" he broke off quickly, "I forget that I am speaking of worldly matters which concern not my sacred office."

"Nay, wherefore not?" said Mistress Edith smiling. "I pray thee, do not stint the wine, Reverend Father. There is plenty more in the cellars, and my Knight would have been pleased to see thee enjoying it. It is good, is it not, Reverend Father?"

"It *is* good, daughter—mass, there is no denying it!" answered Father Hubert, emptying a second cup by way of witness to his faith, "and he would be a poor judge of God's favours that should have any doubts of it—truly, he would

be a liar, daughter!" added the jolly monk with an air of bold defiance, as he poured out a third gobletful and prepared to send it after the others—"I say he would be a liar, daughter, for the wine is very good and wholesome, and a credit to all that may have had a hand in it!"

There appears to be no doubt that the wine *was* very good, and, moreover, that Father Hubert was by no means endowed with the head to carry it which had been possessed by its late owner, who had so unconsciously provided for his posthumous guest's entertainment. The burly priest, indeed, albeit an old, could scarcely be reckoned a seasoned, toper, and this not alone through the caprice of Nature, which had been pleased to allow him more zeal than capacity, but by reason, too, of the many intervals of forced abstemiousness during which no supply of his beloved indulgence was obtainable; so that, though, as the porter had said, he would have drunk the ponds dry had they been wine, as a matter of fact he only drank when he had the chance, and that, alike to his body's present grief and his soul's future affliction, was not every day. Certain is it that the worthy Father could not drink long without the potent fluid getting the better of him, and when this happened he did not yield himself by halves: his whole nature changed, or rather, all his qualities became ludicrously mixed-up and shuffled; amongst the rest, his accustomed caution casting its skin and putting on a very motley of recklessness—his shell (to return to our former image), which was wont to be shut so closely, being opened to its widest limit, and ready for the first Oyster-catcher that was minded to pluck a meal from it. Watching

him with the calm enthusiasm which a cat devotes to a captured mouse, Mistress Edith was now able to judge of the descriptions she had received of him. Circumstances, however, vary characters as lights do a picture, and the lady had not seen Father Hubert, or had seen him for a stray moment only, quite as the Knight and her porter had done. The jolly monk's body was certainly as fat, and his face was as red, as his portrait had depicted him, and his eyes, also, which were at length clear of clouds and twinkled without hindrance, resembled a pair of stars; but the foil of the face she had heard Sir Wilfrid talk of, the dull moon, the dim night, the even vacancy of a heaven—this was all gone, and the contrast along with it, for the soul of the man was loosed, set free by the one wizard which ruled him, and it shone forth without favour from every feature, and no longer through the eyes alone. But Mistress Edith cared nothing for the study of these things: what she noted and rejoiced at was that the oyster was opening, and that her chance of plucking the coveted treasure from its gaping shell was increasing with every wave of the springing tide. That tide she resolved to help forward with all the force her wits could lend to it.

"Do not spare the wine," she said with an encouraging smile. "I am glad thou likest it, and my Knight would be glad, too. Thou already lookest the better for it, Reverend Father. I pray thee, let me fill thee another goblet."

"I thank thee, daughter, one other cup, if it please thee—I do feel the better for it," returned Father Hubert with a look full of contentment. "Verily, our labours are over-weighty for our poor infirmities, and the soul thriveth not in a starved

belly. I thank thee, daughter—one other cup, and I am satisfied."

Mistress Edith hastened to pour out the wine, and, as she did so, said seriously—

"Methinks it is a shame to keep the good Brethren without proper comforts. They of all men, who spend their souls for the weal of others, should have their bodies made pleasant for them, and I wonder thy worthy Prior should so neglect them—that is," she added with an enquiring look at her visitor, "if he doth neglect them, and I fear from what thou sayest that it indeed must be so."

Nothing could have borne stronger witness to the wellnigh miraculous power of wine than Father Hubert's answer to this speech. Of all living men he stood most in awe of the worthy Superior beneath whose rule he flourished and withal fattened; yet he replied with a reckless abandonment of caution which would have frightened those who commonly knew him—

"The Prior is a fool, daughter! I say he is a fool, and was born a fool—ay, and that he will die a fool, unless, truly, his ways be soon mended for him by a miracle! He thinketh I am afraid of him," continued the jolly monk, snapping his fat fingers with an air of great contempt, "but I tell thee, daughter, I do not care that for him! Let him do his worst—ay, let him do his worst—I say, I care not *that* for him!"

Father Hubert snapped his fingers several times in contemptuous defiance of the absent object of his wrath, this latter sentiment quickly taking the place of scorn as confused memories arose in the monk's mind of the many fastings and

vigils which his reverend enemy had thought fit to impose on him. On her side, Mistress Edith, who watched him with a measuring eye, began to think that the tide had flowed high enough, and that if it went much further her oyster would be covered by the waves, and its treasure lost to her. She therefore resolved to come nearer her object; but hoping that the present road might prove the straightest, was minded to make trial of it first: with which intent she said to the indignant priest—

"I pray thee, Reverend Father, why shouldst thou be afraid of him, and why should he think that he can frighten thee? I warrant thou hast done nothing to be in terror of."

"Thou sayest true, daughter," rejoined the monk a little doubtfully, "but when a man—and that a Prior, too—hath the meanness to play the spy on a brother's actions—his own private actions, do ye mind, daughter—the Devil cannot stop all the shutters! But I tell thee," he went on angrily, "I am even with him in his spying, I have as good a secret as his—ay, and, if I liked, I could make his House hot enough for him, for all he boasteth so finely of it to the lord Bishop. Let him point his finger at me, if he dare! By the mass," added Father Hubert, forgetting between the wine and his wrath the pious character he had given himself, "I warrant there be worse livers than I in the Priory, and the Prior may keep a few of his plaguy fastings for some of them, if he must needs play the saint with poor sinners!"

"I have heard that he is very strict, and methinks 'tis not well to be too much so, for, after all, the good Brethren are only human like the rest of us," said Mistress Edith

sympathetically; "but I am glad thou hast got a secret to balance his, and I trust it is a good one, for I should greatly relish a jest against that saintly Prior of thine. I hope, Reverend Father, thy secret is a good one."

"It is a good one, I warrant thee, and a proper jest, too," replied Father Hubert, nodding his head with satisfaction. "By the Rood, what thinkest thou of a holy monk, and the Prior's own favourite, dressing himself in knight's harness, and going to fight in the King's lists like a common champion of the world? That's a good enough secret to stop my lord Prior's mouth for him!"

In her excitement Mistress Edith nearly let a cry of joy escape from her; but she had sufficient thought to control herself, and to say quietly to her visitor—

"It is indeed a good secret, Reverend Father. But what motive had the monk for thus joining in the tilting? Surely he did not joust for the mere sport of the thing—dost thou think so?"

Father Hubert kept silent for a few moments, as though trying to collect his thoughts, and then answered—

"Motive, daughter? I remember now he had a motive. His motive, truly, was to avenge some one—methinks it was his mother, or else some other woman—whom the fellow he killed had done a wrong to." As he said this the monk's eye suddenly lighted upon the late Knight's suit of armour, and he exclaimed hastily—"Beshrew me, daughter, but thou didst ask me somewhat about this matter when I first came here, though I mind me not——"

Mistress Edith rose in haste, and, standing between her

visitor and the object he was looking at, said with a laugh—

"Beshrew *me*, Father, for as poor a hostess as guest ever supped with. Why, thou art drinking no wine with all our talking! Come now, I will pour thee one more bumper for the luck of this house thou so honourest, and thou shalt drink to my health and good success, if the pledge please thee."

Father Hubert, nothing loath, pledged his fair hostess to the last drop; and then the latter, after making good this leakage, and still smiling pleasantly, said—

"That must be a curious sample of a monk thou hast just told me of, Reverend Father. By our Lady, I never heard of such a marvel!"

"He *is* curious, daughter," repeated the monk in a thick voice—"a very marvel, as thou sayest. Why, body of mine! he is proud enough for a prince, and giveth himself airs fit to turn a plain stomach. None knew what pond he had been hatched in; but Lord! I scented the Prior's fish, and wouldst thou credit it——"

"I know not till I hear it," broke in Mistress Edith impatiently. "I pray thee, tell me—where did he come from, Reverend Father?"

Father Hubert turned his heavy eyes, which yet found fire enough for a faint twinkle, full on the lady's face, and said mysteriously—

"Dost thou know that pleasant knight, Sir Wilfrid Alderic?"

"I know him a little, and he was a friend of—someone I was once well acquainted with," answered Mistress Edith quickly. "But why dost thou speak of Sir Wilfrid Alderic?"

The jolly priest gave a profound look of cunning at his questioner, as he replied in a voice which was fast becoming inarticulate—

"Because he and the fighting monk I am telling thee of are buttons off the same jacket—dost thou take my meaning, daughter?"

"I presume thou meanest that they are brothers?" returned the lady as indifferently as she was able. "Is it not so, Reverend Father?"

The monk nodded his head heavily in response, and then Mistress Edith said—

"And how callest thou this wonder? Hath he any name by which he is known to thee?"

Here Father Hubert, having told almost everything that was worth knowing, suddenly became seized with a misty sense of discretion, and, putting up his fat forefinger, said in a low whisper—

"If I tell thee, wilt thou promise not to breathe it into other ears? Say, daughter, dost thou promise me?"

"Nay, now, Reverend Father," replied Mistress Edith with a laugh, "thou art treating a pleasant jest too seriously. I desire but to have a merry quip with thee against the Prior."

"Mass, then, I will tell thee," said Father Hubert huskily. "The fellow is called by us Brother Bernard, but his carnal name is——"

Father Hubert never finished his sentence, for at this point Nature, as in the end she always does, yielded up the victory to Wine, and the head of the too-jovial monk sank upon the table, fondly resting between the remains of his beloved sack

and those of its companion in ruin, the half-consumed venison pasty.

Mistress Edith, on her part, with a cry of triumph sprang to the side of her dead Knight's effigy, just as she had done after her interview with Sir Wilfrid Alderic; and, as then, placing one hand on his pierced breast, and pointing with the other towards Heaven, she exclaimed in fervent tones—

"I thank thee, God, for having at last answered my prayer, and for thus lifting the cloud from my lord's murderer!" Then, stepping quickly to the table, and taking up the almost empty goblet, she added—"I thank thee, too, thou strange Spirit of good and evil! for without thee I should have wrought in vain, and my vow would scarce have been accomplished! I swear never to mock thee again for the tricks thou playest the fools which trust thee, for thou hast proved thyself a better friend and a worse foe than ever my fancy had dreamed of thee!"

Drunk as he was, Father Hubert's ears caught the cry of triumph, and some of the words which accompanied it. Lifting up his head, and staring vacantly at Mistress Edith, he muttered in a grumbling voice—

"I pray thee, what hath happened, daughter? What art thou thanking God for?"

Mistress Edith started for a moment at the sound of the monk's voice, and then she said—

"Only that I have had such a pleasant evening with thee, Reverend Father; for, God knoweth, I was never before so well entertained by one of thy Brotherhood."

This speech caused Father Hubert to stare still more

vacantly, and, being a little annoyed at having his rest disturbed, he answered testily—

"Methinks thou hadst best let God alone, daughter, and not meddle with thy betters' business! I pray thee, now, go to thy bed, and leave me to sleep in peace."

And that was the last remark which Father Hubert vouchsafed during this singular interview.

CHAPTER VII

THE MONK AND THE MAN

On the day after that Spring-song of Bernard, which had gone forth to the Autumn breezes and made such a wind of them, the two monks set homeward on their return journey from the diocesan capital, and early in the afternoon were wending their way through the forest underwood, very near the familiar trysting-place of the night before. Soon, indeed, the latter spot was reached, and Bernard and his friend checked their mules a moment while they gazed at the dead embers of the lately kindled fire, which almost seemed to suggest a melancholy comparison between its own feeble existence, brief as bright, and that of the nearly as feeble mortals who had created it. One, however, of the two travellers did not long content himself with contemplation. Leaping from his mule, and motioning to his companion to do the same, Bernard said in an earnest voice—

"I pray thee, Clement, let us rest here a short while. We

are in good time, and I have somewhat serious to say to thee which I have kept until we reached this place, as methinks it is fittest to hear my secrets."

Clement looked at his companion with the sorrowful air of one who only expects ill-tidings; but he followed the other's example, and dismounted from his mule, saying gravely as he did so—

"Alas! brother, thou art ever carrying burdens which were not put on thee. When will the time come that thou wilt be content to run the common course set thee, nor trouble thy feet with more than their path findeth them?"

"When death cometh!" returned Bernard impatiently. "I have told thee so often enough to make thee credit it. But in truth, Clement," he went on in a quieter tone and with a look of troubled doubt, "I have that to speak to thee which I know not how to speak, that to ask of thee which I scarce dare to ask, and which I fear thou wilt refuse as soon as thou hast heard me; but thou wilt at least promise not to reveal what I shall say to thee?"

"I, also, have told thee before that I would betray nothing which thou didst entrust to me," replied Clement. "Thou knowest me well enough to be sure that I will keep my promises."

"I care not for my own secrets," said Bernard sadly, "and thou art now relieved of one of them; but this concerneth another's honour—it may be, another's happiness; and therefore, though I trust thee as I would none else, thou must forgive me if I seem to doubt thee by again asking thee to give thy promise."

"I do promise thee," answered Clement, "and none shall ever learn from me what thou tellest me. I know not what this secret is; but I imagine that it concerneth thine errand of last night, and yonder damsel thou didst then seek to have speech with."

"What else might it be—what other secret have I got?" said Bernard with a faint smile. "Nevertheless, it sufficeth for all—it filleth my world for me." Then, after a moment's silence, he continued—"I tell thee, Clement, when we stood here last night by this wasted fire, thou didst not warn me too wisely of the path my feet were venturing on, nor did I run too lightly in it, for my own heart divined the perils of the ground before it."

Bernard again broke off in his speech, as though the thread were too fine for the needle, and Clement said eagerly—

"Heaven be blessed, if thou indeed doubtest that path, brother! I shall thank God with a glad heart if thy feet turn back from their straying, and thine eyes look again to the place they wandered from!"

"I do not doubt," rejoined Bernard in firm tones, "and I shall never turn back from the path my feet have chosen. Dost thou think I am one to fly from the frowns that face me? What I had to tell thee was that I had taken a step forward, not that I had run backward at the first shock, and left my friends to meet the dangers which I dared not!"

"Thou mightest do worse than run away," returned Clement, "when the danger is thine own soul's temptation; and especially," added the young priest simply, "when thine

enemy is a woman. I would to God thou hadst run like a very coward!"

Bernard laughed loudly in spite of his sombre humour.

"By our Lady," he said, "I am half gay, half gloomy, but I did not think thou couldst have raised such a laugh in me! Methinks, Clement, thou fearest a woman as much as thou wouldst a ghost."

"Ay, and more," answered Clement seriously, "for a ghost may frighten the bad into being better, but a woman turneth the best from his good purpose. But tell me what thou hast done, brother? I am anxious to learn what hath befallen thee."

Bernard's gleam of mirth quickly faded from his face as he reflected how he might best meet his friend's question, and acquaint him with the great decision he had come to. At length, speaking in a low voice, and with a hesitation that was not natural to him, he said—

"Thou knowest, Clement, for what purpose I left thee here last night—or rather, thou knowest not, for I knew it not myself—I knew but that I loved that fair being we had been talking of, and that I must see her, and speak with her—I knew and thought of no more than that. Well, Heaven—or perchance thou wouldst say the Devil—favoured me beyond my hopes, for her father and his trusted servant were absent, and the others had gone to bed; and when I sang that same Spring-song thou didst once teach me, lo, my fair spirit answered to my prayer and left her Heaven, and soon we were together, standing beneath those old trees where I first wandered with her. I tell thee, Clement, I had not forgotten

thy warning or my own fears, and I had no thought in my heart beyond what I have told to thee; but verily Fate must have laid its finger on us, for I had not been thus moved to seek her without an end: she was in need of my help and counsel, and she had no other friend to lean upon—that had happened, Clement, which I had not dreamt of, and which in a moment, and despite our wills, changed our whole course for us—ay, even as some quiet stream is hurled suddenly down a rock it is not thinking of!"

Clement smiled at his friend's comparison of a quiet stream, but he merely said—

"Is not her father a friend to lean upon? Methinks a young maiden should need no better."

"He is only the worst enemy that she hath got!" replied Bernard bitterly. "I pray thee listen to me, Clement. When she told me that she was in trouble and needed my counsel—verily, my heart warned me that her father might perchance seek to wed her to some gentleman the world would approve of, and as she had owned that she loved me, and me alone, I doubted not that she felt sorrow at the choice forced on her; but I swear to thee I was not selfish enough—I a monk, and out of the pale of the world's thoughts—to stand between her and a path that haply might prove a joy to her. Well, so much for me, Clement. I am not a magician, and I could not guess that the man chosen for her, the promised guardian of her young life, the protector, forsooth! of her tender feet, the companion of all her days, was the villain who hath twice insulted her, the traitor who careth nothing for a woman's honour, be she dead or living, and who heedeth

neither the laws of God or men—the man my tongue shameth me to call my brother!"

Clement listened to this disclosure with mingled anxiety and astonishment. He had no more expected it than his friend had done before him, and he saw at once the fatal fruit that was likely to spring of it. For the moment, however, he contented himself with saying—

"I am sorry to hear of this decision of the Knight her father; but art thou sure, brother, that there is no doubt of it—art thou quite certain he hath spoken to her of the matter?"

"Thou shalt thyself judge of the doubt," answered Bernard in the same bitter tone. "Part I heard from her own lips, and part I overheard her father say to her as I lingered before returning here. Sir Wilfrid hath twice visited the house since he left the Priory, and hath as easily made his peace with this proud father as if he had offended the Knight's kitchen-wench instead of the daughter he pretendeth to rate so highly. By the Lord, too, that being comfortably settled, the poor girl was chosen to seal the bargain; and when she wept, and swore she could not and would not wed Sir Wilfrid—after a decent show of fatherly regard for her scruples, she was told that the thing *must* be, and that if she were silly enough to set her face against her fortune, Sir Edmund would find wisdom for her as well as a husband—in plain terms, that he meant to force her to the match whether she would or no; and that, Clement, is the whole matter in brief, though thou must imagine for thyself all the trouble she hath suffered of it, and the battles she hath had to fight with her tender father, and also with my worthy brother; and, certes, if thou

canst see any better way out of it than our wits have found for us, I would thou hadst been present to give us counsel."

Bernard spoke lightly, but his grave looks betrayed the heaviness of his heart behind them. Both the friends felt the issue that was approaching, and fended it off as best they might, somewhat as sailors, drifting on disaster, cheer their passengers, or perhaps themselves, with better faces than their hearts can answer to. Clement replied to his companion almost as lightly, that is to say nervously, as the latter had done, saying to him with a smile—

"And what counsel didst thou give? In truth, brother, thou wast the only advocate that had a hearing."

"And I pretend not to have been a free advocate," returned Bernard quickly. "I told her what I would have done had I been a knight like my brother, or even a priest as our fathers were before the Normans took our land and our laws from us —yea, or any creature under Heaven beside the slave and monk men had made of me—that I would have married her, and bidden the whole world, and all the fathers in it, to challenge my good right to her; but I told her, also, that I *was* a monk, that the chain which fretted me was forged for ever, and that I could not save her from her trouble by the only help that lay in me without bringing shame, and perchance sorrow, on her fair head; and I told her—and I swear to thee I meant it, Clement—that I would rather die than be guilty of that wrong to her. But God wotteth we are not masters of our own fate. At that moment, had she bidden me, as my tongue counselled her, to go back to the darkness she had smiled me from, to look no more

on the sweet light she had shed on me—I tell thee, I swear to thee, I would have obeyed her—with a heart dead and buried, truly, and a soul doomed to its own perdition of despair—yet I would have done it; but when she told me that I was more to her than all the world and all the chains which men had bound it with, that she would choose my path to walk on, that she preferred my sorrow—ay, even my shame—to all the joy and honour which men or the world could offer her—then, Clement, that moment was gone—gone for ever—and I swore only to be true to her till death should sever us; and, by Heaven, I *will* be true to her, and no man, nor devil either, shall come between us—God alone shall break the bond which His love hath been pleased to bind us with!"

Clement's tones were grave enough now, as he stammered faintly—

"And that bond, brother—I pray thee, what is this bond thou speakest of?"

"I would do as our fathers did, and, priests though they were, thought no shame and knew no wrong in so doing," replied Bernard, suddenly leaping to the point of his resolve—"I tell thee, I would wed her; and since she is willing to risk all for me, verily I should be a worse than coward if I would not do as much for her, and dare to look the world in the face as boldly as she, a weak damsel, hath the courage to."

Clement had expected, at least dreaded, this answer: nevertheless, his friend's avowal struck him with all the force of an unseen blow, and he exclaimed with as much horror as if his fears had never prepared him for it—

"Thou wed her, brother! Thou, a monk, and not a shepherd, as thou hintest, of the common fold—thou, the sworn servant of God, the plighted husband of His Church alone! I tell thee, Cuthbert, thou canst not do it—thou canst not lightly break thy vows—or worse will befall thee, and this maiden also, than thy darkest fancy hath ever dreamed of!"

"And I tell *thee*," rejoined Bernard with a gesture of fierce impatience, "that I can do it, and will do it—ay, and that no mortal hand shall thrust me from it! Dost thou fancy that I have not thought of these things? By Heaven, I have borne the bonds thou speakest of too long, and they have cut into my flesh past enduring, and I swear to thee I will suffer them no further, or thou shalt call me a slave truly, and I will talk and act like one, nor idly ape at freedom I dare not strike for! How often must I tell thee that I love not this path I walk in, and that I chose not this prison which encircleth me? I am a man, and I will not yield the rights Nature gave to me—I am my father's son, and I will not forsake the woman that trusteth in me, that looketh for help to me, ay, and that loveth me! Verily, Clement, the die is cast, and it is in vain for thee to preach sermons to me. Either aid me with thy friendship, or leave me to my own shifting—thou canst not turn me from my purpose by thy talking!"

The young priest looked almost as scared as he had done when gazing down into the blight-besieged valley beneath the Raggedstone, when his fancy had pictured some agency more terrible than is wont to be associated with the work either of

man or Nature. Doubtless he thought the same now, for he turned to his companion with a groan, and in a tone of helpless sorrow said to him—

"Preaching is indeed vain, brother, for I wot this is the Devil's work, and I can only pray for help to Him Who is alone stronger than the Devil! Alas! who can warn one that is both blind and deaf from the precipice his feet are running to? I cannot hinder thee, for thou wilt neither look nor listen, and I fear thou wilt not pause in thy mad race till thou hast thyself fallen headlong, and art become part of the ruin thou now heedest not!"

"I ask thee not to hinder me, but to help me," answered Bernard quietly. "What thou callest a precipice is to me a cliff that may be climbed, and thy hand might help me past some of the rocks which lie in the course of it. As for those vows thou art ever minding me of, we look at them from two hills, and our sight agreeth not. Thou regardest them as a bond betwixt God and me; and I as chains which man hath forged for me, and which, therefore, I have the right to break asunder. For that other matter, we see no better: thou art for Rome, and I am for Milan; and it is vain spending to dispute it."

Accepting his friend's proposal to leave that side of the ground neutral, and being himself in despair of further argument, Clement only said—

"I see not how I can help thee in this matter. I told thee that the time would come when I should no longer be able to keep pace with thee, and thou wouldst have to run alone. Since thou art so madly set to dash thyself on this rock, and

wilt neither heed my counsel nor listen to my warning, I see not how my friendship may avail thee."

"Thy friendship *might* avail me, ay, and avail me much," replied Bernard eagerly, "if thou wert willing to so far stretch it as I would ask of thee."

"I pray thee, in what way?" said Clement, more coldly than he had ever before spoken to his companion. "In what way wouldst thou stretch our friendship, brother?"

Bernard hesitated a moment, as though even he feared to put the thought that stirred him into plain speech, and then said in a low voice—

"I would ask that of thee, Clement, which I know well will strain our friendship to the snapping; but I have no choice, and, believe me, I would not so risk it for any cause save this. Verily, Clement, thou art a priest, and I would ask thee to do this service for us—even to join our hands, and——"

Clement's pale face turned yet paler, and his limbs shook with agitation, as he gasped breathlessly—

"Thou wouldst ask me to wed thee to this damsel? I pray thee—is that what thou dost demand of my friendship?"

"Even so, brother," returned Bernard in the oppressed tone of relief which the heart feels when the casting of a burden is almost as painful as the bearing it. "I did not expect thee to make this sacrifice for me; but thou art the friend I would first come to—in life, or death, ay, and in all that lieth betwixt them."

Clement, deeply agitated, and swayed like a vessel between contending waves, gazed at his companion with an almost appealing look, and any one by chance seeing them would

have thought that it was the former, not the latter, who was thus petitioning for assistance. Presently, a little mastering himself, he said more firmly, but still in a faltering voice—

"It is because I am a priest of God that I cannot do this thing for thee. Truly I am thy friend, and I have done much for thee which my conscience approved not—ay, and I would do more, even to my body's death, which I fear not to venture for thee; but I cannot kill my soul at thy bidding—I dare not do this thing thou askest me. God be my judge that it passeth friendship, and that thou hast done me a cruel wrong to demand it of me!"

Bernard showed no sign of anger as he listened to his friend's refusal and the reproach which accompanied it. He had indeed scarce hoped for a better issue, and only the cloud of gloom on his face, and the bitterness that flashed through his answer, gave any hint of a storm, if storm there were, within him.

"It is the old gall that soureth us, Clement!" he said mournfully. "Verily, that drop spoileth all the cup of life—love, friendship, every sweet which Heaven was pleased to fill it with! Forgive me that I have done thee this wrong thou blamest me for, and, if thou canst, forget it also. For myself, I would do what my heart approveth in the face of all men: it was for the sake of her who hath trusted to me her happiness, and maybe, too, for the sake of yonder old man who hath done some kindness to me, that I sought to avoid the peril of scandal; but doubtless I shall find a stranger, or one whose conscience is less fettered than thine, to do this service which thou refusest me. And now, brother, let us

finish our journey, and I will ask no more of thee than to keep my secret."

The arrow of this speech went home to its mark, and Clement's face grew so wrought with painful doubt that Bernard felt sincere remorse for having thrust on his friend's conscience the burden of his own selfish troubles. With his wonted impetuosity he was about to say so, but at that moment, seemingly unable to bear the conflict any longer, the young priest threw himself on his knees, and, with uplifted hands and eyes strained heavenward, exclaimed fervently—

"O God, show me the path Thou wouldst have me to walk in, for verily I desire to do Thy will; but I am blind, and Thou seest all things, and I know not how to choose so that the good may fall and the evil may not arise! Thou knowest all things, and Thou knowest whether what I deem evil be evil indeed, or whether I do well to put my hand to it, that greater evil spring not from it! O God, I pray Thee to have pity on my blindness, and to help my halting feet, that so I may have wisdom to choose aright, and that I bring not shame on Thy Holy Church, or sin upon the souls Thou hast trusted to me!"

For some time after uttering this supplication Clement remained in silent thought, or it might have been prayer—Bernard knew not which, but he could see by the way his companion's frame shook and trembled how deeply the young priest was agitated. In a while the latter rose up, and, approaching his friend with the calm look of a mind settled with itself, said simply—

"God forgive me if I am wrong, brother, but since I

cannot persuade thee to cast this thing from thee, I dare not leave thee to thine own guiding. I would not have thee, or this maiden that trusteth in thee, to peril your freight in a doubtful vessel; nor would I have shame to fall on our Holy Church, or upon our own blessed Order. Verily, brother, I will do what thou desirest of me because it seemeth to me the lesser of two evils; but it may be that I have chosen the greater, and that my soul will stand in judgment to give account for it. I have asked God to counsel me; but I know not of a surety whether He hath answered me, or, if He hath, whether I have hearkened aright to Him. Nevertheless, if the thing be against God, it will not prosper; and if it be of the Devil, we must look to suffer pains for our part in it."

Saying which, and giving Bernard no time either to proffer his thanks or to refuse the sacrifice made for him, Clement mounted his mule, and prepared to set forward on his journey. Bernard was about to follow him when the loud blast of a horn caused him to look suddenly round, and the next moment the hound Rollo leaped upon him and covered him with glad caresses. These were soon interrupted by a cheery voice calling from among the trees—

"Down, Rollo! Down, boy, I say! Canst thou not keep thy feelings under that thick hide of thine? Thou wilt drown Master Cuthbert with thy slobberings!"

This change came as pleasantly to Bernard as sun-stirred waves after a cave's darkness, and, running up to Clement, he said hastily—

"I pray thee, Clement, tarry a little longer for me. I would fain speak a moment with old Redwald yonder."

Clement gravely nodded assent, and then Bernard, taking the old man to the further end of the glade, said in a low tone to him—

"Redwald, thou hast ever been a true follower of our house, and a faithful friend to myself. I have now somewhat to ask of thee which goeth beyond thy former services, and which concerneth my happiness—ay, and that of another far dearer to me—more than all I have yet called on thee to do for me."

The old soldier scratched his grey locks thoughtfully, as he answered—

"Whatever it be, it shall be done, Master Cuthbert." Then, clapping his hand against his side, and making a sword-flourish with the stick he carried, he added promptly—"Doth it anyways concern this, Master Cuthbert? Thou hast but to say the word, and——"

"No, no," interrupted Bernard smiling. "Truly, Redwald, we have practised that enough for a season. What I now desire of thee is a more peaceful enterprise—at least, I would fain hope so—but it will none the less put thy merits to the proof. I promise thee, 'tis a tougher task than killing men, even the best and stoutest that ever stood to thee."

Redwald looked a little disappointed at this announcement, and, drawing his dagger, consoled himself by fiercely whittling the end of his stick, very much as though he had been carving an enemy; but he replied as promptly as before—

"Whatever it be, it shall be done, Master Cuthbert."

Bernard laid his hand on the old man's shoulder, and said in an earnest voice—

"Thou knowest, Redwald, that I never looked very kindly on my life in yonder House whither they took me after that trouble we have lately dealt with."

"Mass, how shouldst thou?" exclaimed Redwald angrily. "No man of thy family ever fitted a monk's harness, and thou shapest as ill to it as any of them! The Lord knoweth, they were fools or knaves that tried to wed thee to monk's weeds; but, as I told thee, the Devil was at the bottom of that whole business."

"Thou speakest of wedding," said Bernard, catching eagerly at this opening. "Would it surprise thee, Redwald, to know that I am thinking of that very thing, and that it was for no less a matter I now asked thee for thy help and counsel?"

"No, it would not—by the Lord, not a jot, Master Cuthbert," returned the old soldier bluntly, "no more than thy wish to kill thy mother's enemy. Holy clerks fought and wedded in my grandsire's days—why the Devil should they be less men now than they were in his time? I tell thee, Master Cuthbert, I am right glad to hear it of thee, for thou wilt be the better for a change of petticoats, and I will help thee all I can to shift thy present ones. Show me the way, and I will go to the other world for thee!"

Never had any man easier counsellor in strait of soul or plight of body, and Bernard almost forgot, in his joy at it, the sacrifice which his other friend had just made for him, contrasting the young priest's hard-yielded favour with this frank devotion of the old soldier. At any rate, his spirits found their wings again under the cheery breezes of

unquestioning sympathy, and his loosened tongue speedily made the old man acquainted with the simple story of his love, and all he had done, all he purposed, all he hoped for. When he had ended this account, his faithful follower turned to him and said with a thoughtful air—

"Well, Master Cuthbert, thou hast picked the prettiest flower in all this Forest, and thou hast chosen the sharpest stinging-nettle for a rival, and thou hast also got the knottiest old oak of a father-in-law to knock thy head against! I pray thee, Master Cuthbert, how wilt thou contrive this business? Dost thou mean to turn thy back on yonder House in right earnest, or——"

"I know not any better than thou dost, Redwald," broke in Bernard doubtfully, once more brought to face the inequalities of the ground before him. "I had half resolved to make shift with my present course, but I fear the burden would prove too weighty, and, moreover, I like not the thoughts of it. Doubtless, it would be wiser to seek some distant place where I should be known of none, and where none would talk of me; but to do so 'tis needful to carry a full purse, and the lack of it would be like to bring a blight on the fair flower thou speakest of, and, by the Rood, I would rather die twenty deaths than do that, Redwald! Truly, thou hast asked me a riddle which I cannot answer."

"Thou art wrong in one thing, Master Cuthbert," rejoined Redwald with a cunning smile. "Thy father, God rest him! cast one shovelful of wisdom on that fool's heap of his. Not feeling sure what the Devil or the Prior might do for thee, he left a small matter in my care for thy using, and it will be

enough for thy wants, Master Cuthbert, till such time as thou hast breath to look about thee. But methinks I have a better plan for thee than this flight of thine. The plague of a cry will be raised after thee when thou hast shown thy heels to yonder pack of black beagles, and very like thou wilt be found ere thou hast had grace to run to a safe covert; but if thou wilt hide thyself in my house awhile, the Fiend is in it if they ever look to find thee there, and if they do, I know a trick to throw the scent for them; and when they have tired their legs with doubling, and their throats with yauping—faith, Master Cuthbert, thou mayst then quietly slip out by the back door and leave them to come in by the front one, for I'll warrant they will not catch thee, and be damned to the whole black kennel of them!"

Bernard was well contented with this plan, and he grasped the old man's hand gratefully as he answered—

"Thou art ever a true friend in trouble, Redwald; but I like not to be a care to thee, and I fear we shall over-burden thy small household."

The old soldier laughed loudly at this objection.

"There are not many of us to ask a leave of, are there, Master Cuthbert?" he said; and then with a graver look added—"Truly, only myself, since my poor dame—God make our roads to meet again!—went to Heaven. Lord, Master Cuthbert, thoughts of her will ever fetch the rain into these old sky-holes of mine—'tis a foolish trick of theirs, but I cannot mend them of it! But indeed, Master Cuthbert, thou wilt make a lonely house the blither by thy biding in it, and I will do my best to make thee and thy sweet lady comfortable;

and I think 'tis the best plan for thee till thou art free to find a better."

Bernard's own eyes were in some danger of catching the "trick" which his follower so much lamented, as he thanked the old man for his kindness, and accepted his proffered refuge. Then he said—

"There is another service I would ask of thee, Redwald, which perchance I may lack freedom to do myself. I doubt me how it standeth between her I love and the Knight her father, and I would fain know if that matter presseth. I will presently write a letter, which I pray thee to find some means of delivering to her. If thou seest her not abroad, thou mayst be able to gain speech with her by her window, even as I did; but be careful lest her father or any of his servants discover thee. 'Tis a doubtful venture, but I see no better way of getting news of her."

"Trust me to manage it, Master Cuthbert," replied Redwald confidently. "I have not left all my wits on the battlefield, I promise thee. Show me but thy lady's window, and neither the Devil nor her father shall hinder me from delivering thy letter, and bringing thee another in exchange for it."

Bernard quickly described Rosamond's window with the precision that only belongs to a lover. Then, agreeing to presently meet Redwald in the woods which skirted the Priory buildings, and again heartily shaking his follower's hand, he turned to join the patient Clement, and soon the two monks were lost to view in the thick umbrage of the upland forest.

CHAPTER VIII

AN OLD PROVERB WITH A NEW POINTING

LATER in the afternoon of the day which has already opened on us a strange scene might have been witnessed, had there been any prying eyes to take note of it, in that same venerable Forest which covers so large a tract of this history—to wit, old Redwald, with a crossbow in his hand and the dog Rollo at his heels, hunting the woods like a Red Indian, and searching every path and glade, known or unknown, in the quest he had undertaken for his young master. Somewhat tired, and a trifle out of patience, he had at length bent his steps to the clearing where Bernard and Rosamond had lately met, and, throwing himself at the feet of a veteran oak, gave up his body to rest, and his mind to a little quiet reflection. The result of this latter operation was a change of tactics: he resolved to lay regular siege to the hostile fortress before him, instead of further pursuing that particular defender he had all this while been searching for—if, indeed, our poor heroine could in any sense be reckoned one of the garrison, being at the moment a close prisoner, and under grave suspicion of correspondence with the enemy. However, Redwald had settled on the plan of his campaign, and having done so he was minded to take things leisurely, and to patiently await the proper time for putting it into practice. Stretching out his limbs over the thick moss between the widespread roots of the tree, and

keeping his eyes sharply fixed on the little castle beyond him, the old soldier exclaimed in a grumbling voice—

"Mass, I begin to think we were in the right, Rollo. Yonder rusty old billhook of a Knight hath certainly put our game the wrong side of the wind for us, and both our noses are at fault—dost thou understand me, boy?"

Rollo seemed to understand very well, for he slowly wagged his tail, and laid his nose on his master's feet, looking up at Redwald with an expression of profound interest. The old man leant forward to pat his head, and then went on—

"Thou seest 'tis no use our hunting the forest, Rollo, for the game's nowhere in it. We must keep a close eye on yonder walls, and when night cometh—and 'tis a fair moon to light us—we will see what may be done in the matter. So thou mayst e'en make thyself comfortable here for a good spell, Rollo. The kennel is big enough for thee, is it not, my boy?" he added with a laugh; "and if there is not overmuch for us to do, there is plenty to think about."

Rollo was much too respectful a listener to interrupt his master by any remarks of his own: he only wagged his tail again, and sloped his ears, to show that he was attending; and presently Redwald continued—

"If the matter be as we think, Rollo, she is not like to come here to us. Dost thou know why, my boy? 'Tis very simple—because she cannot. But thou thinkest with me, Rollo, dost thou not? that she is fast bolted in yonder chamber—that one—dost thou see?—with the laced jambs." The dog looked where his master pointed, and then the latter resumed—"Faith, though, if she be, I know a trick to come at

her, ay, and to fetch her out, too, when Master Cuthbert's ready to beckon her. I warrant thee, we shall not fail in the business!"

Here Rollo puckered up the great folds of his face into an expression which might well have passed for frowning, so much so, indeed, that the old soldier burst into a merry fit of laughter as he cried to him—

"Mass, thou art a pretty-mannered dog to doubt thy own master's cunning! But 'tis no matter—thou wilt laugh the other side of that yellow cheek of thine when thou seest the trick we are going to play them, more especially as thou hast got to help in it."

Thus reproached or laughed at, he knew not which—and dogs hate both ridicule and uncertainty—Rollo rose with great dignity, and, marching up to his master, licked the old man's face with a solemn energy that bespoke his feelings.

"That's for bones, I reckon," said Redwald coarsely. "Well, thou shalt have thy fill of bones for to-night's supper, if thou doest thy part of this business properly. But lie down, boy, and have done with thy slobbering! I suppose thou thinkest my face is not clean enough to meet a lady's eyes by moonlight, and at a shaft's distance, that thou usest it with the freedom of a washerwoman!"

Rollo did as he was bid, once more stretching himself at his master's feet, and for some time silence took the place of this singular dialogue. The pause, however, was presently made an end of by the old soldier, who seemed to be in a talkative humour, saying—

"I told thee, Rollo, that there was plenty for us to think

about. Look at that patch of broken turf yonder. I tell thee 'tis the very spot where Master Cuthbert, God bless him! dealt that last stroke of his. Mass, 'twas a fine stroke, Rollo, and I taught him the trick of it—art thou not proud of thy master, boy? Ay, wag thy tail a turn! By the Rood, though, thou wert nigh wagging it the wrong side of thy rump, for all thou lookest so pleased with it! Whew! 'twas an ugly knock which that devil of a Sir Eustace fetched him! I thought Master Cuthbert had clean forgotten our trick that time, Rollo; but Lord, he hadn't, and it did my heart good to see the way he remembered it, and thou mayst e'en wag thy tail for company, to show thou art glad also."

Rollo obeyed this injunction almost to the peril of the member exercised, but the next moment he gave one of his warning growls, and, looking quickly towards the castle, Redwald observed a mounted figure crossing the drawbridge and making at a slow pace for the open clearing. This he recognised to be Sir Edmund's favourite servant, Oswald—like himself, an old soldier; and as the two veterans were as good friends in peace as once they had been in war, Redwald resolved to quit his hiding and engage his comrade in a gossip, in the hope that the meeting might prove of service to his present errand. Leaving, therefore, his crossbow under Rollo's charge, and bidding that guardian not to stir from it, he advanced towards the drawbridge, and hailed his former messmate in a voice loud enough to have been heard by any member of the garrison not sleeping, and to have awakened those that were so. This double shaft was not without effect, for, unobserved by Oswald, but promptly noted

by his visitor, a fair head appeared at the window which Bernard had described as Rosamond's, and the old soldier concealed a grim smile of triumph by stooping to pick up the cap which had somehow fallen from him—a piece of clumsiness, as that worthy took it to be, which greatly amused Oswald, who cried laughingly—

"Faith, thou needst not doff thy cap to an old comrade, Master Redwald! Keep ceremony for those that want it, and tell me what good chance hath brought me the luck of seeing thee here?"

"It was not chance, since I came on purpose to have a gossip with thee," replied Redwald simply; "but I see I have chosen my time badly, as thou art about setting forth on a journey."

"That is true, and I am sorry for it," said his comrade with a disappointed look. "I should have liked a gossip and a cup of sack with thee very well, but we must e'en leave it for a better season; and 'tis no use my asking thee to tarry here, as I have to attend my master, and I know not how long we shall be returning."

"Hath the Knight travelled far, then?" asked Redwald in a careless tone. "I thought he strolled but seldom beyond these walls of his."

"Only to thine old master's son, Sir Wilfrid Alderic's," answered Oswald, "but when he entereth that house, the Lord knoweth when he will come out of it."

"Sir Wilfrid Alderic's!" exclaimed Redwald with an air of great surprise. "By our Lady, Master Oswald, I thought thy Knight was in the Devil's own dudgeon with poor Sir Wilfrid."

"The Devil hath made peace, then," returned Oswald with a laugh. "Thou seest, Master Redwald," he went on quickly, as though ashamed of such a jest on such a subject, "'twas no great matter, after all. Sir Wilfrid made a mistake, and hath apologised handsomely for it, and the Knight, my master, hath as handsomely forgiven him; and that's the end of the whole affair, and God be praised for it!"

"That's the end, is it?" repeated Redwald absently, and tossing a stray pebble into the moat as he made answer. "Well, God be praised, as thou sayest, if that's the end of it."

"Why, no, it is not quite the end," replied Oswald with a discreet wink. "There is something else, Master Redwald, which methinks thou wouldst not guess the first time without my telling thee."

"Then tell me without guessing, and save the time—I like news but hate riddles," said Redwald bluntly. "What's the wonder, Master Oswald? Hath old Sir Edmund taken heart to get wedded again?"

"Lord, no—thou art warm, but thou hast not caught fire," answered Oswald laughing. Then he added—"To say truth, Master Redwald, I like not to prate of my Knight's private matters; but thou art an old friend, and I can trust thee, and the news will soon be public enough. The thing is this: there is to be a match between our houses—to wit, thy young master is to be wedded to our young lady; and that's the end of the whole business."

"So that's the end, is it?" again repeated Redwald quietly. "'Tis a pretty riddle enough, and I should never have guessed

it without thy telling. But what sort of answer maketh thy young lady herself to it?"

"Not so good, Master Redwald, and that's where the rub comes," said Oswald, his face suddenly growing graver. "Of a truth, our young lady's answer is not quite to my Knight's liking."

"There is always a rub in these cases," observed Redwald philosophically. "Doth thy young lady, then, not fancy Sir Wilfrid for a husband?"

"I tell thee, no, Master Redwald," replied Oswald with some impatience. "She doth not fancy him at all, and the Knight her father fancieth him over much, and between them the Devil hath a fine choosing!"

"Mass, but these young girls are hard pleasing!" said Redwald in a tone of wonder. "'Tis strange that she should not fancy such a knight as Sir Wilfrid, is it not, Master Oswald?"

"Why, I am not sure of it," rejoined Oswald, shrugging his shoulders; "and indeed, if thou wilt forgive my saying so, Master Redwald, I do not fancy him myself very greatly."

"Anyway, thou hast not to marry him thyself," said Redwald pleasantly. "Thou mayst be thankful for that mercy, Master Oswald."

"I tell thee I do not like it," answered Oswald with a troubled look. "God wotteth that I love my old master well enough, and that I would die any day of the year to serve him; but I loved his sweet dame also, and I dandled my young lady when she was no longer than my arm here, and, by the mass, I like not to see the girl forced into a thing her

heart turneth from, and I cannot bear to hear her weeping all alone in yonder room of hers, shut up like a common prisoner in a jail—she a lady, and the daughter of a worthy gentleman! But indeed, Master Redwald," added the old man apologetically, "I never knew the Knight like this in all the years I've followed him, and I think his body must be ailing, or he would never have been so crossed in his spirits."

"A bad stomach is the Devil's good servant," remarked Redwald, quietly stroking his comrade's horse as he gave birth to this profound reflection. "So he hath locked up thy young lady in her own chamber, hath he, Master Oswald?"

"Ay, more's the pity!" replied Oswald with a sigh, "and I carry the key in my pocket here; and I tell thee, Master Redwald," broke off the old soldier ruefully, "I like not the job any too well, thou mayst take my word for it."

For a moment Redwald seriously entertained the project of forcibly depriving his old comrade of the key, and, storming the citadel with his own single arm, bearing off Rosamond in triumph to his young master. A little consideration, however, upon the difficulties of this plan, and also as to what he should do with the lady when he had got her, induced him to abandon it, and he contented himself with saying—

"Why the plague, then, dost thou not turn it the right side of the lock, and let the poor girl out on her parole for an hour's airing?"

"Because," answered Oswald somewhat sternly, "though I may doubt my master's wisdom, I would not be a traitor to his wishes. Wouldst thou have done such a turn to old Sir Wilfrid, Master Redwald?"

"Mass, no, thou art right, thou art right," said Redwald, reverently lifting his cap. "I was but sorry for thy young lady. Nevertheless, thou art right—keep thy key and thine honour from rusting, Master Oswald. The flag we have fought under first, else the Devil hath the discipline!" Then he added—"But is the matter so pressing? Meaneth thy Knight to make a friar's match of it?"

"I cannot tell thee," returned Oswald moodily. "Maybe to-morrow, maybe the day after, maybe never at all. But I must stay here no longer with thee, or my master will add a word to our gossiping. God-speed to thee, Master Redwald, and better luck to our next meeting!"

So saying, the old man-at-arms rode off on his errand, leaving his former comrade the wiser for one or two things—namely, the present absence of the chief officers of the garrison, and the necessity for using speed in the proposed relief of the fair captive. Taking a wide circuit through the woods, in order to mislead any eyes that might be watching him, Redwald returned to his post, and quietly waited until night and the moon should make it convenient for operations. These two allies came in due course, and with them the old soldier was gladdened by the sight of Rosamond once more at her chamber window. She was gazing with the kind of melancholy satisfaction peculiar to lovers at the scene of her late interview; and moreover, having caught a glimpse of Redwald when that warrior had so loudly saluted his whilom messmate, and having recognised him as her lover's friend, she was not without hope that he might be the bearer of some message to her, even were Bernard himself not within easy call of him.

Divining the latter of these two motives—and the one was enough for him—Redwald stepped cautiously from behind the trunk of his tree, and made a sign to the lady which was at once responded to. After that, holding up Bernard's letter, and pointing his crossbow in the manner of one about to shoot, he motioned to Rosamond to withdraw herself from the window into a place of shelter. This dumb-show Rosamond was also quick to interpret, and, having signalled that she understood what was wanted of her, she promptly retired from the window in obedience to her instructor's warning. Then the old soldier, drawing from his doublet an arrow without a head, and speedily tying Bernard's missive to it, fixed it on the string, and, taking a steady aim, shot it straight through the narrow arch of Rosamond's window. This feat being accomplished, he turned to Rollo, who had watched all these movements with great interest, and said with a satisfied smile—

"That was not bad, my boy, for a clumsy shaft with a lover's letter as barb to it; but we shall see how the lady liketh it."

Rosamond was not long in showing this. Coming forward again to the window, she held up the letter in one hand and the headless arrow in the other. Redwald, who understood that she wished to send back an answer, but knew not how to despatch it, in his turn pointed to the moat which lay between them, and after that to the dog. Apparently the girl took his meaning, for she made a gesture of assent, and then once more disappeared from the window. Again smiling his satisfaction to Rollo, who was indeed the most sagacious of confidants, the old soldier said with a wink—

"Thou seest, Rollo, she hath no bow to shoot with, and thou wilt have to swim the moat to fetch her answer. Mind thou doest it quietly, boy, and without splashing, and thou shalt have a dish of bones fit for the King's kennel."

Rollo wagged his tail in response, but a little doubtfully, as though he were undecided whether to regard his master's remark as an insult or a compliment. The attention, however, of both master and dog was soon called back to the castle window, whither Rosamond had again appeared, holding up the arrow with her answer attached to it. As before, Redwald replied by pointing to the moat, and, calling Rollo forwards, signalled that she should drop the arrow into the water beneath her. This Rosamond at length did, but seemingly not without some doubts as to the issue; and the next moment, at a sign from his master, the hound ran swiftly up to the bank, and, quietly plunging into the moat, seized the arrow in his mouth—returning with it, and laying it safely at the old soldier's feet, with the same speed and stealthiness which had marked his whole performance.

Rosamond unfolded the hands that she had tightly clasped in her anxiety while watching her dumb ally's movements, and waved her gratitude both to him and the faithful Redwald; to which the latter responded with a doff of his cap, and the former by a wag of his dripping tail; and this was the last signal made on either side, the two conspirators forthwith fading from Rosamond's view into the dark forest underwood, the old soldier only remarking as they took their way—

"Faith, boy, thou hast done thy part of the job very well,

and thou hast earned that supper of bones which I promised thee—ay, and thou shalt have it, as sure as thy master is called Redwald!"

CHAPTER IX

A CHOICE OF THE DEVIL

In the World's great drama there is perhaps nothing more strange than the way in which people are sometimes working from opposite points, with equal zeal, and often at the same time, but all the while in blind ignorance of one another's action. The phenomenon almost resembles two headlong mountain streams dashing down their respective rocky channels, and only joining their wild waters where they meet in a mad union below—after which they run soberly enough in the wider river or lake which soon loses and forgets them. Thus it chanced to happen that the afternoon which witnessed Clement's promise to help the lovers in their proposed happiness, saw as well the fierce joy of Mistress Edith over the secret she had drawn from the inebriated Father Hubert; and that while Sir Edmund Dunstan and his friend Sir Wilfrid were quietly at work on their side of the projected marriage, the old soldier, Redwald, was as busily labouring on *his* side to sap the foundations of that doubtful enterprise. A little later on, too, it will be seen that in the very hour when Bernard was lifting the cup of his greatest joy, Mistress Edith was also raising her hand to dash it from his unconscious lips; and in the present

instance, that is to say this chapter, while Redwald and his dog Rollo were hurrying through the forest exultant over their success, the above revengeful lady was occupied in a debate with the victim of her late lord's sack, the object of which debate was, though unknown to either set of combatants, to countermine the old soldier's benevolent toils on behalf of his young master. Here, therefore, we have, near about the same time, no less than three groups of human marksmen, all shooting, or making ready to shoot, at one another, and each and all ignorant—or, at most, but dimly conscious—of the others' aim; a complication of mortal blindness which, if ever those superior beings yield to such vanity, might surely cause the angels to weep, and provoke a grim smile from the Evil One himself!

At any rate we find that, on the evening of that afternoon wherein Mistress Edith made Father Hubert drunk, the lady, after some time contemplating the casket which she had, in one sense, emptied, summoned the porter into her presence, and, pointing to the sleeping monk, said gravely—

"The worthy Father was tired after his journey, and he hath been a little overcome with the wine. 'Twere a shame for him to be thus seen by any of his Brethren, or by the people he hath to minister to. See, then, if thou canst by any means rouse him from his present sleep; and when thou hast done so, bring him hither again to me, as I have somewhat more to say to him ere he leaveth."

Father Hubert was indeed drowsy almost beyond common means of rousing, and by the music that proceeded from him one might have supposed him to be dreaming of the services in his own Priory choir, in which he fancied himself still taking

a part. It was with some trouble, therefore, and accompanied by much grumbling and many objections on the side of the burly priest, that the porter at last succeeded in stirring the object of his instructions, and in getting him out of the room. Finally, however, like other tasks of more importance, the thing was done: what was done afterwards—that is to say, what means the porter employed to complete his orders—is not of consequence: only is it of consequence to know that those means were successful, and that in due time he returned with Father Hubert marvellously restored by the remedies applied to him, but looking somewhat downcast, and not a little in doubt of the ground he stood on. When the porter had left the room, Mistress Edith turned to her guest, and said politely to him—

"Thou hast had a heavy sleep, Father, after thy walk and thy supper, but I trust thou art feeling the better for it. I told thee that thy labours were too great for thee."

Father Hubert looked puzzled for a moment, and then said—

"I fear, daughter, that I have been guilty of a great incivility, but methinks I had a taste of thy wine, and it was none of the weakest. Thou must e'en forgive mine offence, daughter, and charge it to that good supper of thine."

For reply Mistress Edith laughed in a way which did not at all reassure the worthy Father's doubts.

"Thou hast not been the least uncivil, Reverend Father," she said, "but, in truth, very polite; and I have nothing to forgive thee, but rather somewhat to thank thee for, since thou hast done me a service for which I shall ever be grateful to thee."

Father Hubert, like all drunkards after the event, had a dim sense of having made an egregious blockhead of himself, and he was imperfectly conscious of having said something which he would almost as lief have been hanged for as suffered to leak from him. Consequently, it was with a very indifferent air of ease, and in a voice which had a tendency to quaver, that he made answer to his fair hostess—

"I pray thee, daughter, what hast thou to be grateful to me for? I wot not of any service that I have rendered thee, though our Lady knoweth I would gladly return thy favours."

"Thou hast more than returned them—nay, make no trouble over it," rejoined the lady with a look of satisfaction that made Father Hubert shudder. "What service hast thou done me, Reverend Father? Truly, all that I desired of thee! Thou hast told me everything I wished to know, the secret I was so anxious to learn from thee, and which thou wast so anxious to frighten thy worthy Prior with; that matter, Reverend Father—hast thou already forgotten it?—concerning the King's tournament and my Knight's murderer."

Father Hubert had not forgotten it, and the jovial monk's face greatly belied its description as he listened to this reminder, before which his last hope, and that but a faint one, fled disconsolate. The matter was indeed too serious for further fencing with, and it was in a tone of mingled appeal and desperation that the unhappy priest exclaimed—

"I trust, daughter, thou wilt not be unkind enough to betray me in this matter? The secret is not mine own, and thou didst me a cruel wrong to steal it from me. By the Holy Rood, daughter, thou knowest not the evil thou wilt occasion

me, and I would thy wine had been in the Devil's cellar ere I had swallowed a drop of it!"

Mistress Edith did not laugh at this speech: on the contrary, she replied to the monk in a strain every whit as serious, and withal as much to the point, as his own.

"Thou hast spoken frankly, Father," she said, when her guest had ended his appeal, "and I will give thee as frank an answer. For the wrong thou sayest I have done thee, I regret the need of it; but thou must bear in mind that a woman stoppeth not at means to avenge the man she loved, and who hath been cruelly stolen from her. 'Tis true I have won thy secret from thee; but I will not use it against thee if thou, in thy turn, wilt stand my friend—that is, if thou wilt help me in the task I have set myself." Then, seeing the troubled look, as of a man halting between two fires, that came over him, she added—"Thou needest not be so frighted at my proposal. I shall not ask thee to stab or poison any one, but only to keep a watch on this monk Bernard, Sir Wilfrid Alderic's brother, of whom thou hast spoken; and that methinks thou canst very easily contrive, and without thy Prior, whom thou seemest to dread so greatly, being any the wiser."

A cold shiver crossed Father Hubert at this further reminder of his lost secret, but he said nothing, and Mistress Edith continued—

"Thou seest, Father, that I have a sharp weapon in my hands, but that I have neither desire nor motive to use it against thee; and that thou, on thy side, hast every reason for obliging me, and for doing the small service which I

ask of thee. It is needful that we come to a plain reckoning. Thou hast to choose between two cross courses, and methinks thou art wise enough to prefer the one which promiseth common good to us, to that which will assuredly hurt thee, and will not hinder me very greatly. Moreover, although thou art now in my power, and I no longer need to tempt thy services, I will make thy help of as much advantage to thee as I offered when thou first camest here."

Malice was not included in the list of Father Hubert's vices: he was too fat, too indolent, too easy-tempered—an animal who only fought when he could not help it: therefore, though he had no great affection for his brother monk, he by no means relished the notion of deliberately doing him an injury, more particularly as he might chance to do himself one at the same time. Yet, as his tormentor had just hinted —and this was the main cruelty of the thing—he had no choice; and Father Hubert was philosopher enough to prefer an evil that was uncertain to one which was sure as fate. Moreover, his disposition was too humble to take precedence in misfortune of any creature living. Consequently, after some deep reflection on these points, and after balancing all the chances possible and impossible, the much-exercised monk turned to Mistress Edith, and said a little sullenly—

"As thou sayest, daughter, there is no choice, and I must follow thy bidding. Tell me what thou wishest me to do; but I warn thee, I cannot lend a hand to any violence, and I trust thou wilt have some regard for my sacred office."

"Should there be any violence," returned the lady rather scornfully, "it will be done by my hand, or by one of my own

servants, and not by thee. But this monk of thine being a gentleman and of a proud family, I would fain strike him through another joint of his harness, and where the blow will pierce him deeper. I know not of such at present, but doubtless one may be found, for it is not likely that a man of his temper should long wear thy dress without tearing it. It is for this I would have thee watch him, and bring me news of him; and perchance thou already wottest of, or hast thyself noticed, such a gap as I seek to discover in him?"

Now Father Hubert *had* noticed a "gap," as Mistress Edith called it, in Bernard's armour, and, as sometimes happens, had fancied it a much greater hole than at the time it really was, or, it was a thousand to one, ever would be, but not, as it so chanced, than it afterwards came to be—namely, the young Benedictine's gallant rescue of the assailed damsel at the beginning of this history. His own robe of righteousness not being quite weather-proof, he was quick to imagine holes in the raiment of others, and he had given Bernard immediate credit for what only that youth's peculiar fate and a train of unforeseen accidents had in the end forced upon him. The jolly priest, therefore—if that term can any longer be applied to one so miserable—was in the position of a man who happens to turn out right although he has every reason to expect himself proved wrong. Several other circumstances had also helped to strengthen his original suspicion; among the rest the amorous confidence of Sir Wilfrid Alderic, coupled with the Knight's jealousy of his brother, as well as the latter's strange conduct and stranger humour—trifles which, though nothing in themselves, are

everything to a man who has a theory. The good Father, nevertheless, had not thought very deeply on the matter until Mistress Edith suggested that "gap" to him, and then the whole possibility flashed upon him, and, glad to have a sop ready for this hungry Cerberus, he told what he knew, and hinted a great deal more that he imagined. Mistress Edith's face lighted with satisfaction as she listened to the monk's conjectures. These, indeed, shaped well with her own shadowy guesses. She had herself learned from the porter, who had got it from his friend the swineherd at a later gossip, that the insulted lady was the daughter of Sir Edmund Dunstan; and during her interview with Sir Wilfrid she had been much puzzled by her visitor's singular hatred of the unknown enemy she was seeking. One mystery was now cleared; and it only remained, with Father Hubert's help, to find the hoped-for link which would make the chain perfect. Cheered by this ray of light, then, it was with an approving smile, and in a pleasant tone of encouragement, that she said to her new ally—

"Thou art on the right trail, Father, and it is the very one I had myself looked for. Follow but that track to the end, and thou wilt do a good service for me, and, I promise thee, for thyself also."

Father Hubert's face did not indicate much prophetical joy in either the one or the other, but he replied with as much readiness as his depressed feelings admitted of—

"I will follow this trail, as thou callest it, and will let thee know where it leadeth to; but I trust, daughter, thou wilt have some mercy on the poor youth. I would not willingly bring

an injury on him, and I think thou mightest find grace to forgive his offence to thee."

Mistress Edith's eyes flashed stormily at this half-hearted promise of help, and the piece of counsel which accompanied it.

"By the mass, Sir Priest," she said angrily, "I did not choose *thee* from among thy Brethren to read sermons to me. Had I wanted preaching I would have sent for another! I tell thee, this poor youth thou so pitiest took away the life and honour of the man I loved—the only friend the world had left me—and, by the Lord that judgeth me, I have no more ruth for the traitor which wrought that mischief than I would have for a foul snake in yonder forest! For thyself, Reverend Father, thou beginnest soon to falter, and I pray thee to take warning ere thou goest further. I have told thee what I would have thee do, and what I will do for thee in return if thou servest me fairly; but I have not told thee what I would do if thou playest false with me. Methinks thou hast wit enough to imagine it, and wisdom enough to choose the path thou wilt walk easiest on!"

Neither the unlucky Father's wit nor wisdom discerned much ease in any path that lay before him, but he recognised that he would have to walk in the one which the lady pointed to, and without more ado he made up his mind to put his conscience in his pocket and run as well as his legs would carry him, trusting to some happy chance to keep him free of the quags and thorns, and praying—which was some comfort to him—that Bernard might escape them also. He therefore again turned to Mistress Edith, and with a crestfallen air, but

in a firmer voice, as of one who was at least sure of his evil, made answer—

"I know very well that I am in thy power, daughter, and thou hast no need to threaten me. I will do what thou desirest of me, and I shall not play thee false, thou mayst take my word for it—or, if thou likest it better, because it is my interest, as thou hast already plainly hinted to me."

"It *shall* be thine interest," returned the lady in a more cordial tone; "and I again promise thee, I will put no burden on thee beyond thy bearing." Then she added—"Tell me, Reverend Father: hast thou greater freedom than the other Brethren in leaving yonder House of thine?"

"Truly, I have, daughter," responded Father Hubert doubtfully; "partly because I am somewhat the elder of the other Brethren, and also——"

The worthy Father did not give the other reasons, nor did Mistress Edith demand them. The latter only said—

"Then thou canst begin to-morrow, or it may be even to-night, to follow this trail we have just been speaking of?"

"To-morrow, if God willeth, daughter," answered the monk, in the torment of his soul not reflecting on the profanity of the application—"to-night it is not possible."

"And thou wilt afterwards come here as quickly as thou mayst contrive to, and tell me thy news over another cup of sack—wilt thou not, Reverend Father?" said Mistress Edith smiling pleasantly.

Father Hubert did not smile, either pleasantly or unpleasantly, nor in any other way give the least sign of present or future contentment: he merely promised what his fair

despot demanded, and with as little enthusiasm as a wax figure that nods by clockwork. Indeed, this was the only conversation on record (from his birth to the end of the present interview) in which the jolly Father's eyes are said to have never once twinkled; so that the heaven of his face, as Sir Wilfrid had called it, hardly knew itself, and the common world below was worse confounded still—the whole great universe, so to speak, of the poor monk's body suffering a chaos of Stygian gloom consequent on the eclipse of those two brilliant lights which had hitherto shone with such undimmed lustre.

CHAPTER X

THE PARTING OF THE ROADS

We have already remarked in the last chapter on the curious circumstance of persons labouring at the same time at the same object, but apart from, and even unknown to, one another—a phenomenon somewhat like two deaf miners hammering on opposite sides of a tunnel's midrib, or, to make use of a more elegant comparison, like two blind ducks tugging at either end of a dried gut-string.

At the close of the day whereon Father Hubert was pledged to begin his unwelcome mission, a different pair of strategists lay concealed in the same edge of the forest which had formed the scene of their late action—namely Redwald, and that warrior's inseparable colleague and companion, Rollo. To

these Bernard was on his way to make a third; and Clement, also, would have added a fourth, but, being unwilling to lend a hand in an adventure he could not sanction, he had preferred to await the issue in another place until called upon to play a part in the final act of this strange drama. On his side, the old soldier had been at his post half the day, carefully maturing his plans, and watching every movement in or about the besieged fortress; more especially keeping an eye on the arched window that faced him, and taking stock of all the points of vantage, alike of ground and water, which lay between him and that chosen mark of the coming assault. Late in the afternoon—and the lateness pleased Redwald—he had had the satisfaction of seeing the old Knight and his attendant Oswald ride forth from the castle, no doubt on the very errand that had called them abroad the day before; and although the drawbridge was drawn up after them, Redwald laughed to himself none the less pleasantly, for he had provided against that contingency, and many others as well, and his courage was not damped by trifles. Moreover, when the Knight had gone, and when the darkness was beginning to fall, the old soldier ventured to copy the cry of a wolf, which brought Rosamond, who imagined friends in everything, to her window; whereupon Redwald repeated the call, and Rosamond was so well satisfied with this wolf that she would have trusted herself alone with him in the forest without the least thought of danger. After this the wily veteran, also satisfied, lay down beside Rollo, and, patting that faithful ally on the head, thus addressed him—

"Thou seest, Rollo, our affair is going very well with us. Yonder old blade and that rusty sheath of his are off the field,

and their pretty captive up in her cage there hath sung a sweet note to us, which thy young master shall presently find an answer for; and by the mass, my boy, he should now be here, for the night will soon be down and the moon up, and 'tis time we began working."

Rollo's tail wagged approval, and his master went on—

"Thou hadst that supper of bones which I promised thee, Rollo, and thou didst very well earn them. There is not so much for thee to do to-night, but thou must keep a good watch here, and let us know if an enemy cometh; and, faith, when we get back home again, thou shalt fare as well as thou didst the other time."

Whether it was the praise, or the remembrance of the bones—and, proud as a dog may be, the memory of bones lingers long and lovingly in the canine mind—Rollo looked pleased enough at his master's speech, and wagged his tail with more zeal and less discretion than ever. The next moment, however, he sprang suddenly up, and bounded into the deep wood behind with a cry of joy that was promptly noted by the old soldier. Soon, indeed, the quick-eared sentinel returned to his post, followed by his young master, as Redwald was wont to call Bernard, and leading in that hero with the air of importance so often assumed by dogs towards their human associates. Bernard patted his head fondly as he said to him—

"Thou art a kindly beast, Rollo, and thou knowest thy friends better than many men do. I would as lief trust my treasure to thy keeping as to most of thy masters."

"And thou mightest do worse, Master Cuthbert," said

Redwald approvingly. "The poor boy did thee good service here last night, and will do again, I'll be bond for it, if thou askest him."

"I owe more to thee, and him also, than I am ever like to repay," answered Bernard in a tone of sadness. "By our Lady, if I live long enough——"

"Live! Master Cuthbert," exclaimed Redwald almost irritably. "By our Lady, I'll warrant thee to live long enough, and blithely enough, too, when this business is once settled for thee. Hark to him, Rollo! Thy young master to talk of living, and an old soldier like me—mass, I have seen more battles than the pair of ye have toes and fingers! But a boy like that—saving thy worth, Master Cuthbert—with the streak of dawn just lighting on him, and the whole day's blessed sunshine to run along with him, to talk of living! I tell thee, Master Cuthbert, thou hast as yet only practised like a squire: thou art now going to carry arms like a man. And to talk of living!"

"As a man—be it so," rejoined Bernard with an effort to break from the cloud which followed him, "and I will cast away the other as well as may be. Nevertheless, Redwald, thou preachest a wide sermon from a narrow text. Truly, the nimblest foot may trip that runneth in darkness, and 'tis half the victory to the brave and strong to know their enemy. Thou, in thy battles, hadst a fair foe in front of thee, and a good cause at the back of thee, and however thou camest out of them thou wert sure of a place to stand or fall in; but I, whether I lose or win, have neither goal nor guerdon—whether I live or die, no name or fame to leave or carry—

no solid foe if I advance, no sheltering friend if I turn back. All the world is my enemy, and 'tis enough to make a coward of the best and boldest!"

The young Benedictine paused in his excitement; and the old soldier, almost as excited, made answer to him—

"There is no coward in thy family, Master Cuthbert; and I warrant, if thou hast few friends they are true ones. Here are two of us that would die for thee as soon as look at thee; and there is young Master Clement, who hath got a good heart in that slight body of his; and there is one waiting for thee at yonder window who would give both soul and flesh for thee—ay, faith, and who is worth all the world thou hast got against thee."

This last reminder served to rouse Bernard from the despondency which the thoughts of his position caused him, or, more truly, from that state of melancholy which so often goes before a great step in life, the doubts, and not the dangers, of which trouble and unnerve us till the moment for striking comes. That moment had now come to Bernard, and the old man's speech stirred him like a trumpet-blast to take up his arms and join the battle.

"No, I am not a coward, Redwald," he said proudly, "and had I a cause to fight for and foes to face such as thou hadst in thy battles—by the Rood, I would do somewhat for my father's name and my own credit! But thou understandest not the doubts which hinder me, nor the fears I halt at. Yet thou sayest wisely—'tis well to laugh while we may; and verily the friends thou hast named to me should content

any man. Believe me, I hold them not lightly, nor thyself the least among them."

Saying which, Bernard held out his hand to the old soldier, who grasped it with great heartiness, and replied as heartily—

"Now thou art thy true self, Master Cuthbert, and speakest like thy true self also. Mass, doubts and fears fit thee no better than that monk's dress of thine, which, God be praised! thou art about to doff, and thou wilt feel a better man still when thou hast done it. Never doubt but we shall win this battle, Master Cuthbert—I'll warrant thee we worst the enemy! And, faith, all's in train and ready for the assault. Here be the scaling-ladders, and the army—'tis but small, Master Cuthbert, but 'tis valiant—to wit, thyself, and myself, and Rollo here; and there's the lady yonder——"

"Hast thou seen aught of her?" broke in Bernard hastily. "Tell me, Redwald—I trust that the Knight her father——"

"She is there fast enough," interrupted Redwald in his turn; "and I have watched the Knight and that gossip of mine, Oswald, safely off—I doubt not on their old errand, Master Cuthbert. The ground is clear for us, and 'tis time we began the attack. Do thou change that suit of thine for the one I have got in my wallet here, while I con over our plan to thee—I warrant 'twill be a surprise for the enemy!"

Unfastening a somewhat large bundle which he had hidden in the hollow of a tree, Redwald drew forth a set of plain garments, suitable for a gentleman of the time, and which had indeed belonged to his late master. These Bernard quickly

began to array himself in, while the old soldier regarded him with a satisfied eye, exclaiming zealously, when the transformation was complete—

"Faith, thou wast always a man, Master Cuthbert, but now thou lookest one! Plague take that monk's suit of thine for spoiling a good knight with its damned petticoats! And plague take *me* if I do not burn it when we are done with this affair of ours!"

Bernard certainly looked strangely different in his new costume, and he could not forbear laughing both at his own changed appearance and the old man's approval of it. The latter, however, who was bent on serious work, checked his young companion by saying in a prompt tone—

"Thou shalt laugh as long and as loud as thou likest when we are safe out of this wood, Master Cuthbert, but let us make sure of our business first. Tell me, what thinkest thou of this scaling-ladder of mine?"

Redwald here drew from his bundle a coil of rope-ladder, of unusual length, but fashioned of such fine yet strong cord that it filled only a small space in packing. As the old soldier unfolded it he said quietly—

"Thou seest, Master Cuthbert, 'twas no use our reckoning without the moat yonder, and even had the drawbridge been down, 'twould have been a fool's venture to have crossed by it. Then, when we had got her out of the window, the lady could not have swum the ditch like Rollo here; and for one of us to have ferried her over would have made too much stir, let alone the cold and the wetting. Now thou seest, Master Cuthbert, this ladder of mine will serve both moat and

window, and though thy young lady may chance to slip in stepping it, she is light and lissom enough, and we must pray the saints that she do not; and moreover, Master Cuthbert, thou seest 'tis the only way to get her across to us."

Bernard was not greatly pleased with this possible flaw in his follower's plan, but as no other scheme seemed to offer itself, and as risk is the natural attendant on all exploits, and, furthermore, as the present risk did not appear very considerable, he resolved to make the best of the situation and to put his fears behind him.

"I will vouch that her courage be not wanting, nor her wit either," he replied after a moment's thought: "in any case, as thou sayest, there is no choosing, or I would have preferred a safer means." Then he added—"But methinks thou hast forgotten one end of thy ladder, and that the foremost. I see not, for my life, how thou art going to get it fixed to yonder window."

The old soldier laughed a laugh of triumph. With the superior air of a veteran towards a raw recruit, he answered proudly—

"Thou art young yet, Master Cuthbert, in the ways of war, but I will teach thee a trick which thy young lady there already knoweth. What hath been done once may be done again, and I am going to repeat a small device of mine which served us very well yesterday. Watch now, Master Cuthbert, and thou shalt see how the trick is done."

Taking a long piece of twine from his pocket, the old man tied it firmly round the notched head of the same blunt arrow which had done such good service the previous night,

and making fast the other end to the rope-ladder, he placed this last in Bernard's hands, bidding him to walk some paces into the wood with it, and to hold it so that the string might have free play. Then, fixing the arrow on his crossbow, he advanced cautiously to the edge of the clearing, and repeated his former cry of a wolf, which had the wished-for effect of again bringing Rosamond to her window. As before, Redwald pointed his weapon as if about to shoot from it, and signalled to the girl that she should withdraw to a place of shelter. These instructions Rosamond at once understood and obeyed, and then the old soldier, taking a careful aim, and saying as he did so—"'Tis a harder job this time, Master Cuthbert, with a cord tacked to it," shot the arrow and its messenger fair between the window-jambs. Dropping the crossbow, the old man rubbed his hands with delight as he turned to Bernard and said triumphantly—

"That was pretty well, Master Cuthbert, with a blunt shaft and a league of twine for a tail to it! I warrant thy young lady will approve of it."

Seemingly Rosamond did approve of it, for she quickly reappeared at the window, and, holding up the arrow and its pendant, made a sign for further instructions. For reply Redwald signalled to her to draw in the string, pointing as he did so to the rope-ladder which Bernard held in his hands. This hint Rosamond, who had grown apt by practice, lost no time in carrying out, and presently her end of the ladder was seen to reach the window in safety, her instructor all the while keeping tight hold of a second cord which, for plain enough reasons, he had had the thought to make fast to

his own side of the communication. Then the old soldier, followed by his companion, crept cautiously forward to the edge of the moat, and, having reached it, made a final sign, which was hardly needed by the prisoner, to secure the ladder to the iron stanchion of the window. This last task was not an easy one for the tender hands entrusted with it, but at length, after much pains and patience, and with the help of some stout cord and a knife which Redwald had attached to the ladder, Rosamond succeeded in accomplishing it to her own and the old soldier's satisfaction; whereupon her two deliverers, stretching the ladder to its full limit, knelt firmly upon their end of it, so as to ensure as steady a descent as possible; and then Redwald beckoned to the fair captive to set forth on her airy journey.

The task was one to try a young girl's courage, but Rosamond redeemed her lover's promise for her, and, crossing her slender bridge with less terror to herself than to those who watched her, presently fell safe and free into the welcoming arms of her deliverers. Then another problem arose, whose answer might be likened to the proverbial one of "cutting the knot"—in plain words, how to remove the proofs of the fair prisoner's flight, and so lessen the danger of her recapture. In this difficulty the old soldier's ready wits again hit upon an expedient. Quickly explaining his plan to Bernard, he desired the latter to place himself upon the ground, and to put forth his best strength in holding fast and steadying the rope-ladder. This being done, the old man essayed the same journey which had just been performed by Rosamond, and with the same success; for presently, and without

misadventure, he reached the window of the now vacant prison. Then Bernard, in obedience to his instructions, letting loose his hold, plunged noiselessly into the water, and swam to the opposite side of the moat. Having seen his companion safely land, Redwald next proceeded to draw in the ladder until he was possessed of the whole length of it; after which, cutting clear Rosamond's fastenings, and stowing them as a further precaution in his doublet, he passed the ladder round the iron stanchion, dropping the two ends to his confederate below him, and, Bernard grasping these firmly in his hands, the old man easily slid himself to the ground, and then pulled the freed ladder after him. Nothing now remained save to coil up the ladder and to fling it to the bank beyond, and then for the two adventurers to swim after it; and thus, as the old soldier said with a triumphant laugh when he and Bernard landed dripping at Rosamond's feet, "the trick was done."

The three conspirators now made haste to rejoin Rollo, who had not once stirred from his post; and Redwald, after patting that faithful sentinel's head, and carefully replacing the ladder and cord in his wallet, said to Bernard—

"I was in too great a hurry to change thy skin, Master Cuthbert, and forgot the wetting. There is no help for it. Thou must e'en make shift with a worse suit, and, though I never thought to see myself in such livery, I must make the best of thine old one there. Luckily there is a woodcutter hard by who is a friend of mine, and he will lend me a suit for the nonce; and he is not one to talk of things, and, moreover, I will throw a dust which will blind his eyes for him.

Do thou stay here with Rollo and the lady. Mass, I must run quickly, for there is no time to be wasted."

The old soldier was as good as his word, and it was not long before he returned, bearing with him the borrowed change which he had gone in quest of.

"The poor devil hath but one suit," he said apologetically, "and I have promised to bring it back to him by daybreak; but luckily 'tis almost new, Master Cuthbert, so thou wilt not be much the worse for it, and thou canst change it for a better at my house yonder."

This transformation being effected, the three adventurers, with Rollo at their heels, went their way quickly through the forest, and without further hindrance reached the tryst appointed them by Clement. Here a blank occurs in our history, for we are neither informed of the place chosen, nor the means employed; nor, indeed, are vouchsafed any detailed circumstance whatever of this great event in our hero's career: we are told simply that he was married to Rosamond, and that Clement's was the hand that joined them; after which, our Chronicler adds, the young priest returned alone, and with deep-musing sorrow, to his beloved Priory; and Bernard turned his back on that despised Cloister which had so long sheltered his head, and wherein his feet had paced from childhood, hoping and praying in his heart of hearts that he might never again behold it—at least, never more enter it.

One other incident is recorded for us, which shows what tricks Fate is minded to play its victims, and on what small accidents it reckons for tripping them:—to wit, Father Hubert, following Clement on this same evening, and losing

him through an excess of caution, after wandering a long while to no purpose chanced to be just in time to see the old soldier, Redwald, enter the door of his cottage; whom descrying in Bernard's clothes he concluded to be Bernard himself, and so hit the mark by veriest hazard—thus illustrating the truth of our late reflection, that a man may sometimes happen to turn out right where he has no particular reason for expecting to prove otherwise than wrong.

CHAPTER XI

THE ARROW OF REVENGE

TIME, which has figured in many dramas as a chorus, usefully bridging over certain gaps in the action, we must now call upon to perform a small service for us—namely, to span for us some two or three weeks not accounted for by our Chronicler, at least not in that track of our history in which we are at present travelling.

Father Hubert, it appears, after that glimpse he had caught of the old soldier's borrowed garments, lost no time in acquainting Mistress Edith of his discovery, together with sundry other matters of suspicion; among which was the disappearance of Bernard from the Priory—confirmation strong, dating as it did from the same eventful evening, of the truth of the burly monk's conjectures. Mistress Edith, indeed, was fully satisfied with the labours of her reverend colleague, and considered that he had fairly earned his sack,

which, however, she administered to him with much greater discretion than on his last visit, judging that an open door may let in a foe as readily as a friend, and being aware of the particular key which would fit the door of Father Hubert. The jolly priest, therefore, being kept with his head well above the waves, and having been warned or frightened against venturing out of his depth at any time, was able to take counsel with his fellow-conspirator, and to concert means with her for bringing their design to its hoped-for issue. In this the two plotters had the advantage which commonly attends the spying over the spied—that the former know exactly what they would be at, while the latter know nothing ; an advantage which the monk and the lady seem to have turned to good account, since our Chronicler informs us that, after some couple of weeks or more of patient waiting and watching, Mistress Edith gathered positive proof that the young Benedictine lay concealed in Redwald's house, and that Rosamond was hiding there with him. In her thirst for a full cup of vengeance the bereaved lady did not regret, but rather rejoiced at, the few weeks' delay in her discovery of its object, as the brief term of joy thus allowed him would point the blow and deepen the wound she was preparing for her unconscious victim. Further respite, nevertheless, she did not propose to grant him—first, because she deemed the time of grace already sufficient, and, in the next place, because she was ignorant of her enemy's plans, and knew not at what moment he might change his hiding, and so escape her.

On a certain morning, then, of a late Autumn day Mistress Edith dressed herself for going out, and did a thing which

she had not done in the memory of her oldest servant—ordered a horse to be got ready for her for the purpose of paying a visit to a neighbour. Being filled with other thoughts the unhappy lady's mind had no room for such matters, else might her present journey have offered curious enough reflection, that she should now be travelling the very road which her lost Knight traversed when paying perhaps the last visit he made in this neighbourhood, almost in this world, and upon an errand so strangely allied yet so strangely different. It is pretty certain, however, that Mistress Edith did not think of these things: like a sleep-walker, her eyes were fixed on one object; but, unlike a sleep-walker, both eyes and mind were strained on a mark beyond herself—whose aim, only, lay in herself, whose goal was in another. In such a mood, and on such an errand, the fair avenger arrived betimes at the gates of Sir Edmund Dunstan's little castle, and demanded admission to its lord upon a matter of urgent business. Old Oswald, who happened to receive her, glanced at her with some surprise; but he merely desired her to wait a moment while he carried her message to his master, and, shortly returning, requested her to follow him into Sir Edmund's presence.

The old Knight, despite the vizor of indifference he was wont to wear, had been more affected by his daughter's loss than he cared to show to others. The whole fabric of his pride—and that was almost himself—had been shaken from its foundation to its coping-stones, and trembled to the fall. The dwelling-house of his affections, moreover, had not escaped the general convulsion. The old man missed the

music of his daughter's presence, much as we miss many things when they have left us. He had not listened very attentively to the music while it had been playing to him, but now that it had ceased he was struck by the silence, which seemed strange and even painful to him. As a feather shows the wind, trifles point a loss; and, his first rage over, it was in little things that the Knight felt his daughter's absence. He did not miss her wonted greeting on his goings-out and comings-in, for he never once stirred from the house; but in the mornings and at night-time there was a blank where she had saluted him or asked his blessing, and at meal-times a servant's hand, instead of the fair one that was used to do it for him, filled his cup with the favourite wine which he now seldom tasted. Altogether, the old Knight was anything but as contented or comfortable as he had been before this unfortunate occurrence, and he discovered many merits in Rosamond which he had never dreamed of during her sojourn with him, and which probably only her absence would ever have made plain to him.

Outwardly, Sir Edmund was not much changed by his late trouble: only, perhaps, his form was a trifle more bent, and his features were a little sharper, and—that common sign of the mind's disturbance—his white locks somewhat limper and less pliant to the comb's discipline. Otherwise, our Chronicler informs us, he was the same stern, cynical old man that the years had fashioned, but with most of the frank kindliness gone out of him which had once, as much as the pride and coldness, been a mark to know and remember him by. For the rest, the same informant tells us that when the old Knight

first discovered his misfortune, what with his pride, and disappointment at his broken project, and wrath at his daughter's defiance of him, he fell into a fit of rage such as Oswald had not before seen him in, and which frightened that veteran more than a whole army of Welsh raiders, armed and clamouring at the castle gates, would have done. Then, as suddenly mastering himself, he coldly desired Oswald never again to mention Rosamond's name to him, commanding him especially to see that the servants spoke no word on what had happened, and bidding him, also, take horse to Sir Wilfrid Alderic, to urge that gentleman to pay him a speedy visit.

Beyond this the bereft Knight had done nothing: he had made no search, and had permitted no enquiry, after the fugitive; preferring, since Fate was minded to shoot an arrow at him, to keep his wound to himself, and not to have the whole world fingering it. Since then the little castle might have gone into mourning for Rosamond, or been dead itself, so quiet was it, so unmoved in the world around it, so void of anything that betokened life. Mistress Edith's visit, therefore —if one may use such an illustration—was like that of a person seeking admission to a tomb, and the Knight's reception of her—if we may further stretch the comparison by supposing the dead to speak—was like the inhabitants of that grim abode rising up and demanding why on Earth they were thus disturbed, and what in Heaven's name they were wanted for? Though Sir Edmund said nothing of this kind—indeed, said nothing at all, but merely bowed to the lady stiffly—his manner must have carried the sense of it, for Mistress Edith,

after standing a moment in some confusion, began apologetically—

"I doubt not, Sir Knight, that thou deemest this visit of mine a strange one; but methinks, when thou hast heard the occasion of it, thou wilt not only excuse my thus coming to thee, but wilt also thank me for it."

To this Sir Edmund found enough of his old courtesy, mixed with some of his old cynicism, to make reply, as he led his visitor to a seat—

"No excuse is needed, fair lady, for thy visit to this house, which was ever honoured by the guests that came to it, and I thank thee for adding to their number. I know not thy name or thine errand, but I pray thee to use my house as if it were thine own, and to believe that thou art welcome to it."

Mistress Edith smiled at the contrast between her host's manner and his words.

"In truth, Sir Knight," she said, "I know well enough that I am not welcome, and I had not troubled thee with my presence at such a time for any cause save the one which now bringeth me." Sir Edmund started at this allusion, and the lady continued—"Truly, as thou hast said, thou dost not know me; but I think thou wert a friend of one that was also a friend of mine, and who was treacherously slain at the King's tournament—at least, I have often heard thee spoken of in terms of friendship by the late Knight, Sir Eustace Devereux."

Sir Edmund, like many of his neighbours, had heard of Mistress Edith, though he had never, with one memorable exception, seen or spoken to her; and he had, moreover, received a hint from Oswald as to the strange visitor who

sought admittance to him: therefore he was very well aware with whom he was now talking. Whether he was really displeased with her remark about the late combat, or whether he wished to prove her purpose in making it, he answered rather coldly—

"I was acquainted with Sir Eustace Devereux, and I am very sensible of the loss thou hast sustained in him; but thou must forgive me, fair lady, if I tell thee that thou art in error in calling his death treacherous. Thou doubtless knowest that I was myself one of the King's marshals; and I assure thee the combat was a fair one, and that Sir Eustace met his fate as becometh a brave knight, and by no worse treason than the skill of his enemy's weapon."

If Sir Edmund's design had been to provoke his visitor to declare herself he certainly succeeded, for with flashing eyes, and in a voice as haughty as his own, she exclaimed angrily as she rose up—

"I doubt not, Sir Knight, that the play was as fair and honourable as to steal thy daughter from thee, and then to hide her in a place which thou wottest not of!"

It was now Sir Edmund's turn to yield to surprise and anger. Starting from his seat, and facing the lady with an almost threatening gesture, he said in furious tones—

"By the mass, mistress, what meanest thou by that speech? Who gave thee leave to meddle in my private matters? What knowest thou of my daughter, or——"

The old Knight did not finish the sentence, and Mistress Edith, collecting herself, replied quietly—

"Only that the same hand which, as thou sayest, struck

my Knight so fairly also dealt thee the blow which thou art now suffering from." Then she added—"Truly, Sir Knight, I make no claim to meddle in thy affairs, nor did I come here to offend thy grief by talking of it, but because I thought thou wouldst be glad to learn news of thine enemy, and perchance, too, of the daughter that hath been stolen from thee."

Sir Edmund's pale face turned yet paler, and his features worked nervously, as he listened to his visitor's speech, while, almost unconsciously, the words escaped him—

"By Heaven, it seems that my shame is greater than I had reckoned! All the world knows what hath befallen me! Would to God I were at rest with my fathers!"

Mistress Edith, who was touched with pity at the old man's grief, here drew nearer, and ventured to lay her hand upon his arm, as she did so saying gently—

"I pray thee, good Sir Edmund, make not thy wound worse by fraying it. No one knoweth of thy misfortune save myself and another only, and I can answer with my soul's worth for the latter's silence—mine own thou wilt do me the grace not to doubt of. In very truth, this secret lieth in thy keeping, and its using also."

Sir Edmund had been sore vexed at the words of weakness he had suffered to fall from him, but the balm was equal to the wound, and the lady's assurance that the secret of his dishonour was still safe, though that dishonour proved his worst fears, was no little comfort to the old Knight's pride. Following his visitor's example, he quickly mastered his emotion, and inviting her to resume her seat, while he did the same, said with his wonted calmness—

"I thank thee, fair lady, for thine interest in my poor affairs, and I will not hide from thee my satisfaction that this unhappy girl's secret is in safe keeping. I shall, moreover, be glad to learn from thee—what I doubt not thou camest here to tell me—the place of my daughter's hiding, and the name of the villain who hath thus tempted her from her duty."

"I have already told thee of that traitor," returned Mistress Edith in an eager tone, "and the rest I will as freely inform thee of. Art thou acquainted with one Redwald, an old soldier who was in the service of the late Knight, Sir Wilfrid Alderic?"

Sir Edmund made no other answer save to bow his head in assent, and Mistress Edith went on—

"Then it is in his house that thy daughter is now hiding, and that villain, also, who took her away from thee. I doubt not thou knowest the place, Sir Knight—it is close beside yonder valley of the Raggedstone, and thou canst almost see it from the window here."

Sir Edmund again only bowed assent, very much like a man too occupied with his own thoughts to pay heed to what is said to him, and Mistress Edith with some impatience continued—

"They were there last night—that I can avouch for, but there is no telling when they may spread their wings and seek another roosting; and by the mass, Sir Knight, if thou wilt take counsel of a stranger who wisheth thee well, and if thou desirest to get back thy daughter, I would advise thee to lose no time over it, for every hour is grace granted to thine enemy."

The old Knight did not speak for a few moments, and when he did so he appeared to be rather making an answer to himself than replying to another's prompting.

"God wotteth it is wonderful," he said, "that a man's sons should be so little like him as to do the things which these have done! Old Sir Wilfrid would have been damned ere he had done such a turn to me, and I, also, before I had so used him! But the fashions are changed since our time, and the men likewise, and 'tis no use crying on Heaven to give us better!" Then, turning suddenly to Mistress Edith, he added quietly—"I pray thee, fair lady, what was thine own motive for thus bringing this news to me?"

Mistress Edith looked a little confused by this abrupt question, and she answered with some stiffness—

"Is the motive of any matter, Sir Knight, when a service is rendered out of friendship?"

"But thou art not a friend," rejoined Sir Edmund bluntly, "and thy late Knight was scarce one either, and I wot that people do not meddle in their neighbours' matters without a reason. In a service of this kind I like to know the motive of the person that rendereth it."

Mistress Edith sat for a while in silence, and then she said frankly—

"Thou shalt know my motive, Sir Knight, and 'tis soon told thee. I desire vengeance on the villain who slew Sir Eustace, and who hath stolen thy daughter. Methinks our cause is a common one, and that was my reason for coming to thee."

The old Knight looked at his visitor with a curious

expression of surprise, not unmixed with admiration, as he listened to this speech. Presently he rose up, and, holding out his hand, said to her—

"Thou art in the right: our cause is a common one, and thou shalt be satisfied—by the Lord in Heaven, thou shalt have this vengeance thou desirest! I will send to-night to our common enemy, and thou needst not fear his coming, for he hath at least that virtue of his father, he will not refuse an answer to the man who calleth him. Now, I pray thee, pardon me if I speak no more of it, for I am somewhat tired, and the matter, as thou mayst fancy, is not pleasant to me."

Taking this hint, or rather command, Mistress Edith rose to leave, well-satisfied with the result of her mission, and putting on a good face to thank her host for his reception of her. After passing through the door of the little castle, and just as she was about to cross the drawbridge, she overheard the old Knight, who had accompanied her within a few paces of the latter, saying to himself in an earnest voice—

"By the Lord, 'tis wonderful—a son of old Wilfrid Alderic! He hath his father's face, too, and I trusted that his heart had been no darker!" And then Mistress Edith, who did not greatly like the sentiment, heard him add—"I would to God any other man had done this thing to me!"

CHAPTER XII

THE BEAM BENEATH THE CLOUD

It is curious to note the pains devoted to catching the firefly Happiness, and the small contentment in it when it is captured. This is often so with riches, and often enough, too, with the kinds of happiness which riches will not purchase. Half of life is spent in securing what the other half is passed in enduring. The more gifted, or at least more varied, spirits are apt to become dissatisfied, when they have won it, with the prize they have raced half the world to get possession of. To them happiness is like a shrine worshipful at a distance, but whose glory dims on near approach. Imagination, it is owned, is commonly superior to reality, and scarce any scene or object proves equal to what we have fancied it. This is even true of scenes and objects already familiar, which, repatterned and repainted, exceed the originals by so much as these have faded or are forgotten. If Bernard's happiness did not prove inferior to his imagination of it, it was because Rosamond was an exception to the above rule, and was so much superior to imagination that the latter must have been strong indeed to have created an image which could compare with, let alone excel, the reality. Yet it may be doubted whether the young Benedictine, with his restless spirit and strong craving for action, would have been long contented with a happiness—precious jewel though it were—that was bounded by its own casket, any more than a bird would be satisfied to have wings

without trying them. However that may have been, the test never came to him, and the brimming cup he held to his lips knew no cloying—a consummation which might be desired by a good many of us.

On the evening of the day wherein Mistress Edith paid her visit to Sir Edmund Dunstan, Bernard and his fair companion were seated together in a certain little room which, humble as it was, might have been dubbed the "state" apartment of the old soldier's cottage. The room was undoubtedly plain, and barely furnished, but the faithful Redwald had freely spent on it such few comforts as he owned, to give it the best face possible; to which he had added as gay a show of flowers as the late Autumn could supply him with: so that, after all, the little theatre (to call a small thing by a large name) was not ill-suited to the actors, who, being a pair of lovers, might be supposed to play with spirit enough to dispense with scenery, more especially as they only played to themselves.

The two lovers, indeed, were certainly in a state of rapture, flying, or floating, in that dizzy height of joy which has not inaptly been called delirium, and to which the lightest of passions alone has the power of lifting us. Nevertheless, as with other kinds of delirium, it was not free from painful dreams. To Bernard, after his life of seclusion and stagnation, as his past seemed to him, it was like the freedom of one stepping from a tomb; but it was also, in another sense, like one who had escaped from prison, and who is every moment in peril of a return to his bonds. Rosamond's sky, again, was not without a cloud. To her Bernard was everything, the dream of her desire and her waking happiness; but none the less

thoughts of her old life would steal on her, and doubts as to whether she had done her duty by her father, and many brooding terrors and furtive tremblings for him and for Bernard and for herself—weeds, perchance, such as first sprang in Paradise, and grew there with the flowers, the seeds of both being afterwards blown into the world beyond, where they have shared our soil in common, and sprouted and blossomed together, ever since. It was love, surely, and not a soul (unless these are but twain in terms), that made Undine to grow thoughtful, and turned her laughter into tears—at least, crossed her sunshine with a rainbow! Love and Sorrow teach us most of our lesson of life, and point to more than half our destiny; and the first of them had already shown Bernard and Rosamond the book which the second would presently open for their reading. As yet, the lesson was but a title-page lightly glanced at by a tripping schoolboy—a cloud only dimming the blue heaven, and through which the beams fell with scarce-broken brightness.

As Bernard lay at Rosamond's feet, looking up at her after the manner of lovers—like a child, too, never tired of peeping at his treasure, to see if it were safe, and to admire it—the world of his imprisoned past seemed to have suddenly opened to him: the black rocks which had so long walled him in appeared to have sprung aside by magic, and to have displayed to his wondering view an airy grotto, sun-lighted and sea-windowed, resplendent with Nature's jewelry, and glorious with Heaven's freedom; or, better still, creeping forth from the snaky lengths of a dark cave, he seemed to have burst dazzled and delirious, but all delighted as a soul sighting

Paradise, on the noontide splendours of sea and sky—the full blaze of the horizoned life and liberty he had so long been sighing for. Like a newly-freed captive, ignorant of or long forgotten to freedom, who makes frequent trial of his benumbed senses, Bernard felt that he must often gaze at, and touch, almost breathe the air of, his strange joy; as yet scarcely daring to believe it a solid shape that would stay with him, and not melt away with his delight in it, like one of those mocking fabrics of his dreams he had so many times sought for and vainly called after.

"Verily, I am so happy with thee," he said after one of these long gazings, and after once more making sure that his joy had not changed or vanished, "that I must needs sometimes doubt of my happiness. By our Lady, I knew not that such sweetness was in our world, or that men's lips ever tasted it; and I am in fear that this joy will not stay with me, that it was not meant for me, that it will vanish even as it came, as quickly and as sweetly, and that I shall lose thee, Rosamond—lose thee like one of those fair visions we dream of, and which we spring from our sleep to worship; and lo, they are but mist, and in that moment they fade and fly from us!"

"But I am not mist," answered Rosamond smiling, "and our joy is not a vision, and our love will not fade like the dreams thou speakest of." Then, reaching her hand to him, she added—"Let this be my bond that I am no shadow, Cuthbert, for I promise thee my love will last as long as it, and vex not thy heart any more with these vain fancies."

Bernard covered the fair hand held out to him with eager

kisses, which were so many seals to the proffered bond, as he exclaimed passionately—

"I have no life but for thee, Rosamond—no heart, no thoughts, no speech, save for our love only; and without thee—by Heaven, were I to lose thy light—my soul would become as dead as was my body in yonder prison I have just fled from!" Bernard shuddered as he thus hinted at his escaped past, and then continued in a sadder tone—"And thou, Rosamond, my love, thou also hast some fancies, thou sometimes lookest sorrowful and as though in doubt. I pray thee, art thou happy in our present life? Art thou contented with this path I have led thee into? Dost thou never regret——"

Rosamond bent down to kiss the face that looked up at her, and said fondly—

"How many times must I answer that question, Cuthbert, and tell thee that I regret nothing, and that I would do again—ay, and as many times again as thou calledst me—what I have done for thee, and that I love thee better than all the world?—for indeed thou art all the world to me, and I have left home, and father, and all the world for thee, because I loved thee, and because all the world was nothing to me without thee, and thou wert more to me than all the rest of it—yea, than all else in it!"

Bernard drew a little closer to his fair partner, and clasped his arms tightly round her, as though to hold her from ever straying back to that world she spoke of: nevertheless, still troubled with his fears, he whispered in a doubtful voice—

"But that home, I pray thee, and thy father——"

"Thou must not blame me," replied Rosamond gently, "if

I think sometimes of my father and the home I have perchance made sad to him. Truly, he is an old man, and my father; and though he was somewhat harsh with me, and I could not bear the yoke he would have put on me, my heart doubteth if I have done well by him, and I cannot help but have sad thoughts of it."

Bernard did not answer save by clasping a little tighter the form he held; and Rosamond, who had already learnt something of her lesson, at least had read that title-page we have spoken of, went on—

"I pray thee, Cuthbert, thou must not blame me. Verily, I am going to be a wise wife to thee, and to talk gravely; and methinks we must not look for our joy to have no sorrow in it, for thou knowest none ever have it so; and, moreover, we have chosen to run with heavy burdens, and we are not able to cast them from us. Truly, Cuthbert, we can help each other to bear them, and we can love faithfully till death parteth us, and live as happily as God will let us; and I wot it cannot be otherwise, and that we shall do wisely to bend our hearts to it."

Bernard kissed the lips long and lovingly which had uttered this profound speech. "Verily thou art a wise little wife," he said with a smile, "and I wot thou speakest sad truth enough, for I was born in sorrow, and have lived under its shadow, and only my great joy, which is a new thing to me, hath now made me forgetful of it. Truly, Rosamond, I join amen to that text of thine, and we will e'en do as thou sayest—love faithfully, bear our burdens bravely, and leave the rest to Heaven which ruleth us. Nevertheless, we are not mere slaves of our fate, and methinks, my wise counsellor, we do not well to trust our

happiness to a blind hazard." Bernard paused a moment while he looked earnestly at his companion, and then said more gravely—"I would to Heaven, Rosamond, that thou wouldst consent to quit this place and fly with me to a safer hiding—nay, we would seek some haven where no hiding should be needed, and where I might make a free home for thee, and find fitting work, also, for my own hands, in the face of the world and of all men."

"Thou wottest the cause, and wherefore I have thus hindered thee," returned Rosamond in a low voice. "Could I but see my father once again, and know that he is well and hath forgiven me, I would not seek to delay thee; but my heart misgiveth me to leave him without word of grace or greeting, and methinks we are safe enough in this hiding for yet a little while longer."

"But he will not forgive thee—at least, not till time hath smoothed his anger, and thou knowest from old Redwald that he is in good health," pleaded Bernard eagerly: "moreover, though I think not of mine own safety, no man will ever forgive *me*—no, nor forget me either," broke off the young Benedictine, unconsciously speaking words of dark prophecy. "Believe me, Rosamond, thou wilt but spoil our joy without mending his sorrow, for thou canst not make him hearken to thee as thou desirest, and every hour we linger here is a link in the chain that will perchance drag us back from our freedom —ay, and from our happiness also!"

The tears stood in Rosamond's eyes as she listened to her lover's appeal, and such a look of troubled doubt came into her face that Bernard made haste to add—

"But be it as thou wilt: I would not choose my pleasure before thy peace, or turn thee from what thou deemest thy duty. Do not weep, Rosamond—we will tarry here as long as thou hast a mind to."

So saying, Bernard had recourse to that sweet remedy of lovers for stanching tears—kissed them tenderly away; and Rosamond kept silence for a little while, deeply musing, with eyes bent downcast on the floor, and on her own dainty feet that were beating out a broken tune from it; and presently she looked up again, and said gently—

"Thou art right, and I am wrong, Cuthbert, and I love thee better than my father or any other in the whole world; and I will go with thee to-morrow, or to-night, or any hour thou shalt desire me to follow thee."

Then Bernard, taking her in his arms again, answered as gently—"For thine own sake, dearest, 'tis a wise choice: I pray thee, if thou wilt, let it be to-morrow"——that word so fraught with fate to human decisions ever since the first drops of the golden tide slipped through men's fingers and flowed away into the fathomless gulf, never more to be recalled or recovered!

After that, as is the way with lovers when a cloud has come and gone and the sun shines clear again, Bernard and Rosamond sat pleasantly together, with clasped hands and smiling faces, and singing light lays of their love to the music their glad hearts beat to them—fondly tracing back its amber stream to that first sweet source where it sprang forth suddenly, but all unnoticed, from the little glade; following it as it flowed, ever fuller and freer, through the dark mazes of the

great forest, to that other green clearing under the castle, where its waters gathered and gushed, and spread themselves out into the broad moonlight; sparkling like a magic lake, that has a magic boat moored on its margin, with magic sails and magic oars, which, if the wind will but blow, and the tide flow, and the rowers bend their arms, will speed and carry them—alack! whither not?—to what land of spices and perfumes, to what island of peace and hope, in the misty horizon of man's dreams and Heaven's promises?

Here, peeping in at them as through a half-open door, or a chink in a shuttered window—that door or window of the dim-lit Past—in our pity we would fain leave them, or at least linger awhile relentfully; but alas! all dreams have a wakening, alike pleasant or painful, and, welcome or unwelcome, the great Porter must knock at the shut doors, and the sleepers must arise, and the end comes some time and some way. So it chanced with Bernard and his fair partner in the midst of their greatest joy, with arms locked in long embrace, and hearts beating sweetest time together, and souls dreaming of a glad dawn on the morrow, all beams and brightness and blessing—a knock suddenly came which rudely shook the dreamers from their sleep, and scattered their dreams like dewdrops from dashed flowers—a knock which might have been sent to stir the dead, and which caused Bernard to start quickly to his feet, and Rosamond to turn pale and tremble.

From this scare the young Benedictine was the first to recover himself, and, with a smile to his frightened companion, he said lightly—

"Love hath made a coward of me, to be frighted by a

simple knock at the door! I warrant 'tis no more than old Redwald who hath returned from his ramble in the forest. Wait here for me, and I will go and let him in to us."

"I pray thee, do not go," answered Rosamond in a voice of terror. "I tell thee it was not Redwald's knock, and it may be that the Prior hath sent to fetch thee, or——"

"Whoever it be, I fear not," broke in Bernard stoutly, "and, by our Lady, the Prior will find it easier to send for me than to fetch me! Here is a ward which will keep the door for us!"

Saying which, Bernard took in his hand the same weapon he had lately used with such effect at the King's tournament, and, stepping from the room, quickly went to the besieged door, throwing it open, and scanning the darkness in search of the strange knocker who had alarmed them. Presently he discovered a dark figure standing a little back from the doorway, and holding the reins of a pair of horses; and then Bernard, advancing a pace with his sword ready to strike, demanded in a firm tone who the stranger was and what his errand might be at this late hour. He had not long to wait for an answer.

"I am Oswald," replied a deep voice which Bernard well remembered, "the servant of Sir Edmund Dunstan; and I bring thee a message from my master, who desireth thee to return with me to his house that he may have speech with thee on a matter which concerneth thee and him."

Bernard shrank from the old man and his message as he had not shrunk from the fiercest frowns of his late antagonist, but he made shift to answer with passing steadiness—

"I see that thy master maketh not much doubt of my coming, since he hath sent a horse to carry me back to him; but in truth he sendeth in vain to me: I cannot go to him to-night, the hour is too late, and——"

At this point Bernard, with whose bold temper shifting words suited not, suddenly came to a halt, and, laying his hand on the old man's arm, abruptly added—

"I tell thee, Oswald, I cannot and I will not go to him. Thou art an old soldier, and I doubt not thou knowest what hath befallen us; and, whatever thou mayst judge of me and thy master's quarrel with me, thou wottest well that no good is like to come of this message thou bringest me."

In response, the old soldier drew himself free from Bernard's grasp, albeit with respect, and then said sternly—

"It is not for me to judge my master's business, nor thine either; but Sir Edmund bade me say this to thee, if thou didst refuse his message—that thou wert the first Alderic which ever feared to meet the man who called on him, and that he deemeth thee no less a coward than the knave and traitor thou hast already proved thyself."

This was certainly a bold message to deliver to one of Bernard's temper, and had the darkness enabled him to see the young Benedictine's face Oswald might perhaps have doubted whether his wisdom were equal to his courage. Whatever emotion Bernard felt, however, he quickly mastered it, and rejoined calmly—

"Brave words are ill-bestowed on a bound man, my good Oswald, and it becometh not an old soldier to be the bearer of them. Thy master sayeth truly that I should be the first of

my name to refuse a message. Nevertheless, this is a matter rather for prudence than valour, and I would add no more to the burden I carry. Verily, thou art an old man, Oswald, and I but a young one, and methinks thou mightest counsel me without hindrance to thy master's service. For that master's sake, and for his daughter's also—is it better, thinkest thou, that I stay or go?"

The old man remained silent for a few moments, and then he said in a doubtful voice—

"I cannot advise thee, but I will tell thee where the choice lieth. If thou goest not, the Knight, my master, will come to thee; and thou canst not fly without his wotting of it, because he hath set a watch upon thy hiding here—that is all I can tell thee."

As he listened to these words, which fell like a bolt of doom, Bernard cursed in his heart that fatal "to-morrow" which he and Rosamond had thus suffered to dawn on them, and whose gathering clouds threatened to throw a shadow over the bright beams their "to-day" had promised them. At a glance he saw the dark path he stood on, barred at either end, with that foeman at the further gate of it whom he might as well run to meet as seek to fly from. Turning to the old man, with a heart strangely bound and burdened, as though the fingers of Fate were closing on it, he said mournfully—

"Be it so, then—I will go to this trysting with thee, and may God of His grace rule the falling of it!"

Then he walked slowly back into the house, and into the room where he had left Rosamond, and in answer to the latter's questioning looks said in a quiet tone—

"I pray thee be not frightened, but one hath come to me on urgent business, and I must leave thee for a brief hour or two—nay, sweet, do not tremble: truly, there is nothing for thee to be in fear of; and, I promise thee, I shall soon be back to comfort thee."

So saying, Bernard tenderly kissed his fair companion, and, giving her no time to question him concerning his strange errand, slipped silently from the room and the house, and mounted the horse which the old soldier held ready for him; while Rosamond, left alone, and knowing nothing but fearing everything, knelt at the empty chair which her absent lover was wont to fill, and spent the slow watches of the night in waiting and in weeping, and in praying to God and the Blessed Lady to keep their two souls from that dread cloud whose shadow she had already caught a glimpse of.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LENGTHENING OF THE SHADOW

As Bernard and his attendant rode on through the forest and the darkness neither spoke a word to the other, and no sound broke the heavy stillness save the trample of their horses over the gathered leaves, or now and then the dismal cry of a wandering owl, or the sadder sighing of the wind among the half-shorn branches. It appeared, indeed, as though the whole journey would be passed in silence, the two travellers

either not caring, or not daring, to thrust their faint utterances into a pause which seemed filled by Fate alone. At length, however, the old man turned to Bernard, and said suddenly—

"If thou wilt forgive my saying so, Reverend Father——"

Bernard started like a man from a broken dream.

"Do not call me by that name," he interrupted sharply. "I have left that for ever with the clothes I have cast from me. Is it too dark for thee to see that I am now wearing my father's garments?"

"Then, Master Alderic," continued the old soldier, unmoved by the rebuff, "if thou wilt forgive my saying so, I cannot think how the devil thou camest to do this thing to the Knight my master. Give me credit, Master Alderic," he added quickly, doffing his cap in the darkness with the respect of long habit, "I mean no freedom or offence to thee; but thou art almost, so to speak, of our blood, and I have known thee as a child, and thy good father before thee when he was no older than thou art now; and thou didst play a gallant part at the King's tournament; and—by the Lord that made us, I cannot think how thou camest to do this thing to the Knight my master!"

There was a time when Bernard might have resented such a censure from such a censurer, but it was not now; and he had ever had a love for frank speaking, whether in the proud or humble.

"Thou thinkest me a villain, Oswald," he aswered quietly, "and a false traitor, as well. Tell me now—wilt thou take my hand in thine if I offer it thee?"

The old man hesitated a moment, as though in doubt of his duty: then he said with some feeling—

"It is not for me to refuse the hand of a gentleman and the son of my master's old friend. Faith, too, thou art little better than a boy, and perchance the Devil tempted thee to do this wrong to us."

Bernard stretched out his hand across his horse's head, and his companion returned the greeting with that respect he deemed due to one of ancient race, even though his master's enemy; after which Bernard said to him—

"I will ask thee in my turn, Oswald, how came such a knight as thy master to force his daughter to wed a man she hated and who had twice affronted her—ay, truly, and to give her the slave's choice between that doom and the prison I found her locked in?"

Seemingly, Oswald had no answer ready for this question, or none that he cared to make use of, for he contented himself with his former argument, simply repeating—

"It is not for me, Master Alderic, to judge of my master's deeds, nor to meddle with what pleaseth him in his private matters."

"But thou hast judged *my* deeds," replied Bernard warmly, "and I tell thee I had not done what I have if thy master had used his daughter more kindly, and as the free maiden she had a right to be! I tell thee I would not have done it for twenty times the love I bore her—no, nor for all the precious worth of the love she bore to me, and 'tis all the worth my life hath ever known or is ever like to know! Nevertheless, what is done is done, and I seek not to defend myself with thee, nor

with thy master either. I wot well that the troth of such as I am is lightly reckoned, and that thy master will not hold me less a knave to his daughter because I have wedded her, though God knoweth it was no fault of mine that I could not do so before him and the whole world, and thy master knoweth it also."

The old man was evidently surprised by these last words of his fellow-traveller, for he checked his horse a moment, and said in a more cordial tone—

"Thou hast wedded her, Master Alderic? By our Lady, I had not heard of that, nor my Knight either, I'll be sworn to it. Truly, as thou sayest, thy having done so will not straighten thee overmuch with the world; but it straighteneth thee a little with me, if thou mindest that, Master Alderic, and it may be that it will straighten thee a little with the Knight my master."

In his gloom and loneliness Bernard had been glad to rest a little of his heavy burden on another's shoulders, but his companion's speech rudely shook him from his apathy, and reminded him that he had been prating with a servant, albeit an old and trusted one.

"For what kind of a villain didst thou take me?" he said haughtily. "I wonder thou didst not spurn from thee the hand I offered thee! I tell thee she is my wife before God and the priest that joined us, and, so long as I have a heart to shield her and a hand to strike for her, no man—not her father nor the Pope himself—shall take her from me, or break the bond that is set between us!"

Oswald remained in thoughtful silence for some while, and then said—

"Master Alderic, though it may be I err in my duty by it, I own to thee that I feel a great ruth both for thee and for my young lady, and I would thou wert a free man and rightly wedded to her; yet I warn thee to keep thy sword in thy sheath when thou speakest presently with the Knight my master, for I swear to God, if thou bringest blood on his white hairs, that I will follow thee to the world's end to quit his wrong on thee, and thou hadst better have the Devil for thine enemy!"

As Oswald uttered these words the two travellers entered the open clearing in front of the castle. Here the light was somewhat better than it had been in the thick forest, and Bernard, springing from his horse, and laying his hand on the old man's arm, said earnestly—

"I also swear to God that no harm shall be done him by my hand, and I call thee to witness that I have no sword with me, nor sheath either, and that I come here as a man to be spoken to and not to answer."

Oswald gave a strange look at his young companion as he replied to him—

"There are more swords than one in the world, Master Alderic. Nevertheless, keep thy present mood in thee, and, God willing, the matter may end peaceably."

Then, dismounting also, he led Bernard across the drawbridge, and through the arched gateway of the little castle, and after that into the presence of his expectant master.

The old Knight was awaiting Bernard in the same room where he had formerly received him when led in by the daughter who had since fled from it; and where, too, that

singular fencing-bout had taken place between the young monk and the King's Champion; the same room where Sir Wilfrid Alderic had fought another kind of battle, and been vanquished also; and where Rosamond had wearily gazed through the window (whence her father was himself now gazing), wondering what the great world had in store for her; and where, lastly, Mistress Edith had this very day told the Knight of that dread discovery of hers, and hinted at the fateful summons which had been forthwith sent and was about to be answered.

In the stillness of the old room, dimly lighted by a flickering lamp, one might well fancy the ghosts of these past deeds to be hovering around, holding grim debate on what had gone and what was coming, and, according to their sort and humour, weeping or laughing, perhaps scoffing, at the final scene of that strange drama in which they themselves had played parts on the very stage they were now haunting.

The living actors, indeed—the solid players of the Present—who have at length stepped upon the boards, make but a little braver show than these shadowy stagers of the Past that form their unseen audience. Yonder old man still leaning against the window, and gazing through it like one in a dream, paying no more heed to his fellow-strutter than if he were unaware of, or valued not at a pin's worth, the latter's presence—that other, younger one, standing as mute and motionless, and almost as pale, too, as a mere figure of marble, waiting doubtfully for his leader's cue, which seems never to be forthcoming; whereupon from the ghostly audience, which is growing impatient, proceeds such a hubbub of hissing, and

clapping of hands, and beating of sticks, as—could they but hear the least sound of it all—would fetch the actors about their business in a twinkling.

Presently, in sooth, whether some of these murmurs have caught their ears, or themselves have grown weary of their own waiting, this desired end comes; for the old player, turning suddenly from his window, and advancing a slow step towards his fellow-actor, says in a low, stern voice—

"I have been wondering, Master Cuthbert Alderic, what wrong I had ever done to thee which thou hast thus quitted by stealing my daughter from me and spoiling the honour of the house that made thee welcome to it."

To this the younger player, after a rather lengthy pause of silence, which again evokes the displeasure of the phantom audience, makes answer—

"I wot not of any wrong which thou hast done me, Sir Knight, and I swear that I thought not of injuring thine honour, but only of saving thy daughter from the sorrow which threatened her happiness. Verily, Sir Knight, I did not steal her from thee as thou sayest, for she came to me of her own choosing; and I swear to thee that she had not so come, nor had I ever taken her, hadst thou been content to leave her soul in freedom, nor forced her to run in a road wherein she could not follow thee."

Here we must cast off the thin fabric of our fancy, and don in its stead the homely stuff we have hitherto made shift to wear through this rough journey and in this unequal season. In plain terms, then, we have to record that the old Knight, Sir Edmund Dunstan, on hearing this hardy answer from the

monk Bernard, gazed at the speaker with angry wrath, but withal not without a touch of admiration.

"By the Lord in Heaven," he said, "thou speakest boldly, and methinks thou art like thy father in all save thy heart and thine honour! Mass, man, when thou camest here to-night to me, couldst thou think of no better defence for that black deed of thine than to question my own right to my own daughter?"

"I did not come to defend myself," replied Bernard quietly, "but because thou sentest for me, and because I would not have it said that I feared to meet any man that had a wrong to charge against me; and moreover," went on the young monk in a mournful voice, "because I thought thou hadst a right to question me—ay, and to judge and punish me, if thou didst desire it."

"And moreover," added the Knight with a contemptuous laugh, "because thou knewest that thou couldst not escape me. I imagine thou didst learn as much from old Oswald yonder?"

"I did not fear to come to thee," returned Bernard in the same quiet tone. "I know well that I have done what thou and the world will not forgive me; but I loved thy daughter, and she called to me, and——"

"Thou didst answer her!" broke in the old Knight with blazing eyes. "By the Lord, thou deemest it a small matter to defame the daughter of a knight and gentleman, and to bid her follow thee to thy lodging like a common street-wench!"

Bernard started at these words as though he had been stung, but he as quickly controlled himself, and in a voice

low and calm as before, but with a deep thrill of passion in it, made reply to his accuser.

"I have wedded her at God's altar," he said, "and a priest of God hath joined our hands, and she is my wife in God's sight and in her own also. To me she is as pure and sacred as the mother that gave me life, or as her mother was to thee, Sir Knight, and I would as soon have blasphemed yonder Heaven above our heads as been guilty of the profanity thou hintest at!"

A slight smile crossed Sir Edmund's lips as he listened to this speech, but whether it were stirred by scorn or by some less bitter emotion Bernard could not tell. Seemingly, the latter's news had not the same effect on the master which it had had upon the servant, for the old Knight rejoined coldly—

"Thou hast blasphemed Heaven, and profaned thine own soul, with vows thou well knewest to be vain breathings! By the Lord, of what worth are a monk's vows? Of what value is a monk's marriage to man or maiden? Didst thou think that I should thank thee for this boon of thine, or that any father would smile a blessing on such a sacrilege?"

"It was not my fault," answered Bernard gloomily, "that I am not a free knight, and able to claim thy daughter's hand like that traitor thou wouldst have given her to. Verily, I would have spent my best blood to win a name for her, and one which thou thyself shouldst have deemed worthy her, had my enemies not condemned me to yonder prison—for which wrong, and for all the sorrow that springeth of it, I call God in His judgment to hold them bounden!"

For a moment Sir Edmund seemed strangely troubled by

these last words of the young monk: the next, however, he said with a shrug of disdain—

"And thy friends, forsooth, are to suffer for thine enemies' usage of thee! By the mass, that is a strange way of avenging thyself! Am I, or are mine, I pray thee, to blame for that wrong thou complainest of, that thou hast chosen us to be the butt of thy displeasure?"

"I came not to blame but to be blamed," replied Bernard steadily, "and, as I told thee, I seek not to defend myself, but to receive what requital thou deemest meet for me. If thou desirest my death I shall not flinch from thee, for I would as lief lose my life as the only joy I have ever known; and if thou takest that from me, thou art welcome to take the other with it—nay, I shall even thank thee for a grace granted me!"

As Bernard thus spoke the old Knight's scorn and anger gave place for one brief instant to a gentler expression—a look of compassion, even, and a touch of sympathy, passed over his stern features, while he let fall the same words he had that day used to Mistress Edith.

"I would to God, Cuthbert," he said in a sorrowful tone, "that any other man had done this wrong to me! I could have loved thee as my own son, for thou remindest me of thy father who was as a true brother to me, and methinks thou wert born to nobler things—which now, alas! the Devil or thy fate, or the evil thine own heart begot in thee, hath turned to waste or to worse weeds. By the Lord that made us, I am sorry thou hast done this wrong to me!"

Bernard, much moved by the Knight's words and his

changed tone to him, advanced a doubtful step or two, and then, bending his knee and stretching out his hands to his accuser, exclaimed earnestly—

"Is it too late, I pray thee? Is it impossible to make straight this broken road, to bridge again this chasm between us? I, also, could have loved thee as a son, and God wotteth that I am sorry for this wrong I have done thee, and that I would shed my heart's blood—ay, almost give my soul's worth—to win back thy lost favour!" Then, in a lower voice, he continued—"But thou knowest not the love I bear thy daughter, Sir Knight, else methinks even thou wouldst have some grace for me. Verily, she is the only beam that ever fell on me, the only joy that hath lighted the darkness I was born and have ever dwelt in, and had I had twenty souls I would have given them all for her; for she loved me as I loved her, and what were life or grace, almost honour itself, to such a love as she brought to me? Yet I swear to thee we broke not our trust so lightly. By the truth in Heaven, we set our seal to the bonds which Fate had laid on us—ay, and we would have kept it to our bodies' tryst and our souls' freedom, had not that dark cloud risen up to threaten and spoil us! As God judgeth me, Sir Knight, I swear we had been content, but for that sorrow, to have lived and died in the sweet shadow our sun cast for us!"

Bernard paused a moment, and, the Knight making no answer, he went on with added fervour—

"I pray thee, is it too late? Is thy favour beyond recall? Is there no hammer that will break these chains? Is there no road of escape—not for mine own, Sir Knight, but for thy

daughter's happiness? Thou didst once say that thou wouldst not have scorned me had I been a Knight like my brother instead of the thing mine enemies have made of me. In God's mercy, is it too late? Cannot this freedom even now be wrought for me? I pray thee, canst thou not move the King to entreat the Church's grace for me? Verily, I would spend my life for thee and for the King's service; and if I won not a name which should make thee smile on me, I would at least die in seeking it—I would not return to bring shame or scorn on thee!"

The young Benedictine, in his dream of deeds and glory, and of the great world he so longed to play a part in, had almost lost sight of the grim-visaged Present which was now facing him. With the old Knight it was far otherwise. Turning to Bernard, and coldly motioning him to rise, he said in a stern voice—

"Thou remindest me that I am but fencing where I had meant to fight, and that I sent for thee here to tell thee thou wert a foul villain and false traitor—a coward I will not call thee till thou provest thy right to that also!"

Saying which, the old man crossed to the side of the room, and opening the same panel in the wainscot whence on a former occasion he had taken the blunt fencing-swords, drew forth a pair of weapons of very different mettle from those other ones, and designed for a very different purpose. Handing one of these to Bernard, and at once throwing himself into a posture of attack, he cried fiercely—

"Master Cuthbert Alderic, thou hast fouled my name and spoiled the honour of my house, and I should have done thee

no despite if I had killed thee without word or warning; but I choose not to do as thou hast done, and I have given thee both time and a weapon. Nevertheless, I have sworn to be avenged on thee: take heed, therefore, to thy fencing, for, by the Lord in Heaven, thou goest not hence alive save thou art able to make a road over my dead body!"

For reply Bernard quietly laid down the sword which the Knight had just given him, but without shifting his ground or showing any fear at the threatened attack.

"I will not fight thee," he said in a firm tone. "I also have sworn that I would lift no finger against thee, whatever thou mightest say or do to me. For my life, I have already told thee that thou art welcome to it. Strike, then, and do thy will with me, but ask me not to draw sword in such a quarrel."

"Faith, thou art a coward, after all!" returned Sir Edmund scornfully. "I knew thou wert a villain, but I thought thou hadst had heart enough to face the man thou hadst done a wrong to!"

"Methinks thou knowest that I am not a coward," answered Bernard in a low voice. "I pray thee prove me now with thy sword, and if I flinch from thee or it thou shalt call me by any name thou deemest meet for me; but to fight with thee—thou an old man, and the father of her I hold my wife—not all the world's gibes should make me do it, for I should be worse than a coward—I should be worse than the villain thou hast called me!"

"I have called thee both a villain and a traitor, and they stirred not the blood in thee!" rejoined Sir Edmund with an

angry flush.—"By the Lord, there remaineth but this, and methinks thou wilt answer to that summons!"

As he spoke the old Knight made a quick step forwards, and, raising his hand, struck Bernard full and hard over the cheek. The mark of the blow alone, however, bore witness to this insult, for the young Benedictine neither hindered nor offered to return the Knight's attack on him, merely replying in the same quiet tone—

"Not even that, Sir Knight, will stir me to fight with thee. Thou hadst best save thy pains, and make an end of what thou desirest. Think me a coward, if thou likest—it mattereth as little to me as thy blow. I am here, if thou wishest to kill me; but I will never raise my hand to do hurt to thee."

The old Knight drew back a pace, and earnestly scanned his enemy's face for a few moments: then he said hoarsely—

"Be it so, if thou wilt choose no other way, but none can charge me with wrongly using thee. Kneel now, and make thy peace with Heaven, for I am going to kill thee as I would a wolf in yonder forest!"

At this instant, and as the angry Knight was lifting his sword to strike, Bernard's eye chanced to wander through the little window in front of him, and to glance at a bright star shining almost above the cottage where he had left Rosamond. This suddenly brought to his mind all the love and joy—Rosamond's love and joy also—that he was about to lose with the life which this old man and his strange destiny were demanding from him, and with these thoughts a new idea flashed upon him. In the bitterness of his soul he cursed the pride which had spurred him to this fatal meeting, and blamed

himself for not having rather used the precious moments in an effort to save his treasure and fly the danger. Even now, why should he not do it? He doubted not his skill to easily disarm or keep at bay this fierce old man, and his back was to the door —once reach it, he would speedily fly to Rosamond, and with the faithful Redwald to lend him help it would go hard if they could not win the race against Fate and these weak dotards who sought to hinder them. The thought came quick to Bernard, and he as promptly resolved to put it into practice. Picking up the sword at his feet, he turned to the old Knight, and said with a grave smile—

"Thou wilt doubtless deem me a coward, Sir Knight, that I have changed my mind; but life is dear to the boldest, and, though I am no whit altered in my resolve not to fight with thee, I am willing to defend myself from thy attacks as well as I may be able."

Sir Edmund replied only by a grim nod of approval, and a moment later the stern dialogue between the two men was exchanged for the sterner discourse of their weapons. As he had expected, but not so easily—for the old Knight was a skilled swordsman, and still possessed some of his former strength and activity — Bernard succeeded in warding his opponent's thrusts, and gradually neared the goal of his desire. He had almost gained this end, and, seizing an interval in the furious assaults of the Knight, who was beginning to tire, was about to open and spring through the door, when Sir Edmund suddenly became aware of his design, and calling fiercely—"Thou traitor, thou shalt not thus escape me!" flung himself full upon Bernard, as he did so transfixing his

own breast with the latter's sword, which deeply pierced him, and the next instant the old Knight staggered and fell heavily to the ground. With a loud cry Bernard threw down his weapon, and, kneeling beside his fallen adversary, strove to stanch the wound which he had so unwillingly been the cause of. His efforts were in vain, however, for Sir Edmund gave no sign of life, but had seemingly at once yielded to the fatal issue of his own violence. As he lay there with closed eyes, and face as white as the locks which fell over it, and his tall, thin figure stretched limp and motionless, Bernard gazed at him with a wild despair such as he had never known in his worst wrestlings with his evil fate, and which froze the courage from his heart, almost the reason from his brain.

"God in Heaven!" he exclaimed in tones of frenzied anguish—"What have I done to offend Thee, that Thou hast thus damned me with this frightful deed? O that I had left that accursed sword where my hand flung it, and had let him kill me even as I was first minded to! Would to God I were lying there instead of him! Would to Heaven it were my blood upon his blade!" Then, addressing the motionless body beside him, he cried wildly—"Hear me, good Sir Edmund! I pray thee wake a moment from that sleep of thine, and avenge this foul deed on me! Here is my breast ready bared for thee, and I swear my hand shall not hinder thee! O God—rise up and make an end of me! I swear that I will thank thee—I will bless thee!"

It seemed as though the young Benedictine's cry of despair had really reached its mark, and recalled the wandering spirit for that moment he had invoked; for the old Knight presently

opened his eyes, and, gazing with a strange look at the scared face bent over him, said faintly—

"I thank thee for killing me, and 'tis fitting I should die by thy hand, for I was one of those that believed in thy mother's shame, and therefore our wrongs are equal. Nevertheless, I could have loved thee as a son, and methinks I did love thee. I pray thee, stoop and kiss me, for I would fain die in peace with thee—faith, thou hast thy father's look in thee!"

Bernard, all the heart fled out of him, stooped down and did as he was bid; a passionate burst of sobs, such as had not stirred his breast since the day he lay clinging to his mother's corpse, escaping him while he kissed the cold lips of the dying Knight.

Here we pause an instant to take another glance at those ghostly onlookers of whom we gave a hint at the beginning of this scene; for here, doubtless, they would be at the very pitch of passion, and more divided than ever in their contending sympathies—the malignant part of them not yet satisfied with the grim spectacle they had been feasting their eyes on, and fearful that they were about to be robbed of half the tragedy; the more tender ones smiling through their tears for joy of the late entrance of Ruth and Mercy, and welcoming with their noiseless greeting these angelic players: so that once more there is a rival hissing and clapping in the shadowy audience, of which the plaudits seem to be having the better; when of a sudden a new actor enters, putting the grumblers into blither countenance, and chasing the smiles from the lips of the pitying ones—namely, the old soldier Oswald, who advancing hastily into the room, and seeing his master lying stricken and

bleeding, gave utterance to a sharp cry of grief, but as quickly changed it for a look of such deadly hatred at his supposed slayer that the latter, despite his indifference to life, instinctively started back from him.

This look of the old man had apparently been noticed by the dying Knight as well as by his late antagonist, for lifting his hand he feebly beckoned Oswald to draw near, and in a faint voice said to him—

"Thou hast ever been an obedient servant, Oswald, and I now charge thee to as faithfully obey my last command to thee. As God judgeth us, I tell thee—I command thee——"

Sir Edmund never finished his sentence: the arm he had lifted fell back heavily to his side, and that last command—which might have changed a chapter in this history—died on the lips that strove to utter it. As he had wished, the old Knight had gone to join his fathers, and to share that sleep of theirs which he trusted was not broken by evil dreams. Once more uttering a wild cry of grief, Oswald threw himself on his master's dead body, and, weeping like a child, covered his face with tears and kisses. Bernard, still kneeling on the other side of the fallen Knight, forbore to disturb this sorrow, of which he, too, had a full share; but presently, the old man looking up, their eyes met, and the young Benedictine said earnestly—

"I call thee to bear me witness, Oswald, that he fell not by my hand, nor by any deed of mine. God is my judge that my soul is innocent, and my hand also, of this evil which hath befallen us!"

The old soldier looked sternly at his fellow-mourner for a moment, and then suddenly sprang to his feet.

"I will bear witness," he said in trembling tones and with flashing eyes, "that thou hast foully done my master to death —ay, that thou hast murdered him—murdered him coldly and traitorously, and like the devil thou hast ever shown thyself! I will tell it to all the world—I will go to the King himself—and say that thou, a young man and a practised fencer—God curse thee, a cowled monk, too!—didst stab to death a feeble old man, one with locks grown white in the King's service—after thou hadst stolen his daughter from him for thy vile uses!"

Bernard had already drunk so deeply of sorrow that his senses were scarce capable of a further draught. At this moment life was a very sickness to him, and the world a giddy void—or rather, a stifling nightmare, peopled with phantom faces grinning and glaring horribly at him, every shape an enemy clamouring for his destruction—but one form in all that frightful throng, hustling him and pressing him down, a friend; and that one threatening to become a foe, to join with the rest in denouncing him and demanding Hell's wrath on him. Not at this moment, had he looked on it, would Rosamond's star have brought hope to him, or beckoned him from the grisly shadows that were hemming him round. One little door, only, just behind him, whose single arch stood out dark and calm in the lurid light surrounding it, seemed to offer an escape from the flaming ranks of his furious foes. Staring a while with a dazed look at his new enemy, Bernard picked up the sword he had flung from him, and, handing it to the old man, said in a low voice—

"So little did I desire thy master's life that I sought to give him mine. Thou seekest to revenge his death on me, though

I never raised my hand against him. Strike me, then, with the sword I have just given thee—'tis the same which pierced him and hath his blood on it—and I swear that I will not hinder thee!"

The old soldier convulsively grasped the sword which his enemy had given him, and, raising it, drew back a step as though to strike. For a moment Bernard's life hung on a slender thread, no thicker than a passing doubt, and it might have been well for him, and for more than him also, had the thread indeed snapped as it then threatened. The next instant, however, Oswald in his turn threw the sword away from him, and said with a fierce laugh—

"No, I will not kill thee, for thou wishest to die now, and I would have a better revenge for that devil's deed of thine! Presently thou wilt look on thy life with a kinder eye, and then I will come to thee, and, by the Lord in Heaven, I will be quits with thee for my murdered master!"

The old man paused in his trembling excitement, and then added more quietly—

"I pray thee leave me now with this work of thine. Methinks thou knowest thy way out of the house without my guiding—I would to God thou hadst never entered it!"

Bernard stood for a short while irresolute, and his lips moved as though he were once more about to speak; but, probably judging it in vain to attempt any further defence of himself with his stern accuser, he slowly turned to the door, and as slowly passed from the room and out of the house, and over the drawbridge, into the dark world beyond them. As for the last time he bent his steps from the little castle which

held so much of his past, and which would cover, too, so much of his future, Nature seemed to shudder and shrink from him, and the changed Forest (that would never again laugh with its old blitheness), while it drew back from him, appeared to throw after him a shadow of gloom that was like a pall flung over a waiting hearse. In the dim November night the well-known objects and the stirring memories of them, which were as their souls, seemed like spectres of the joy and glory that were dead or dying. There, in the dark edge of the clearing, was the trysting-place where Bernard and Rosamond had whispered their love-vows. Then, the trees had lightly laughed to the lovers, and sung pleasant music to keep them company. Now, they moaned in the chilly wind as though in pain, and their gnarled faces were twisted horribly into frowns. Yonder, too, was the green space where Bernard had fought and vanquished his mother's betrayer amid the plaudits of a great multitude. No blazoned deed now made death glorious, nor smiling praise sweetened the horror of the crimson stains. All was dark, desolate, doom-like. The offended World had shut its doors on him, and he was alone with his terrible burden—Cain-like, but without Cain's freedom, chained to this frightful curse in the void which his fate had thrust him into. With a groan he turned from these familiars of his lost past—that past already so old and so far-off from him—and looked upward to the wider Heavens, as though hoping to find the pity there which his mother Earth refused him; but he looked in vain to them also: the Heavens were all one with the Earth in this judgment—he saw only one great cloud which covered them both, and appeared to join in a

close grip the stretched-out hands of them : the stars no longer shone there, not even that star which had beckoned him to this very path in the moment when Death was pointing out a shorter way to him : the air, moreover, seemed crowded with mocking voices, calling to each other and to him, one whispering with a laugh—"To thy cell, to thy cell, Benedictine !" and another—"To thy bride, Bernard, and thy blood-spotted bridal-bed !" till Bernard clasped his hands over his racked brows, and thrust his fingers into his buzzing ears, and rushed wildly into the darkness ; to escape, if he might find escape anywhere, the loosed fiends that were tormenting him, and the dread shadow that was girting him round—the shadow of himself and of the deed which had fallen upon him.

BOOK III

THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE

CHAPTER I

THE THIRD ACT

We have now got to the last Act of our drama—that typical *third* which, in spite of the time-honoured and favourite *fifth*, we confess to having a preference for. The division into three, indeed, seems to be the most natural, whether it be applied to life itself, or to that particular representation of the latter we are here dealing with. In the one, it is the commencing of action, the continuing of action, and the concluding of action: in the other, the birth, the living, and the death; or, in a second sense, the getting of knowledge (or experience), the using of it, and the parting with it—if this last, truly, be not a spending with a double rendering, the exchange of half a page for a whole volume.

This division, the more we look at it the more it appears natural. It is the symbol of our Divine Creed; of our World, and of all it contains or is fashioned of; of Time, and of every part of it; of our human existence, physical, intellectual,

moral, and domestic also:—in a word, of almost everything about and above us. In the stages of the World, and in the great series of Creation—more especially in the last leaf of the last issue of that series—we find it illustrated. It is seen in the life of a single man as in that of an entire nation, and in the history of one day as of a whole age—in one act, even, of one day—almost in the very divisions of one act or of one emotion.

In the Drama (to return to our immediate theme), as in the Life it seeks to counterfeit, we have a certain following of events which, in the one as in the other, seem most properly to come under the division we are treating of. Nevertheless, as events are commonly again divisible, sometimes into subdivisions as important as the heads themselves, it is perhaps most natural to divide a drama into as many parts as there are great actions in it; an arrangement which would put an end to all arbitrary divisions, alike of *five* or *three*; and assuredly the former of these has not so much to plead in its favour as has the latter—the one having only a particular custom to support it, the other being backed by a goodly array of precedents, enlisted both from Art and Nature.

We would maintain, therefore, that the divisions of a drama should generally be decided by the necessity of the action, the curtain of the Stage—as with the greater curtain of the greater stage of Life—falling on each event that naturally brings about the consummation of a part, or the whole, of the tragedy or comedy presented; but, furthermore, we maintain that the above division, namely, that into *three*, is the one which is most in harmony with both Art and Nature, and that,

wherever circumstances will admit of its adoption, it is the one which, beyond all right or rivalry, should be chosen.

The Drama, then, in its typical form, deals with one of those actions of human life we have already hinted at, the commencement, continuation, and conclusion of which together go to make the "plot." And here (let alone the Play, the Players, and the Played-to, which are obvious enough types) we have commonly present three great figures of the world at large, the Hero, the Heroine, and that Spirit of Success, or Unsuccess—the "villain," it may be, or else a whole swarm of rival fortuities, good and evil—which in the end determines, as is the case, too, in life itself, whether the piece is to be Comedy or Tragedy.

In the Drama, moreover, at all events in the *Tragical* division of it, it is the terrible persistency, the relentless onward impulse—seen in actual life also, but not so plainly—of the plot, the doomlike progress of an evil act to an evil end, which points so absolute a moral, if the audience would but pay heed to it and carry it home with them.

And this reflection brings to our mind our own half-performed drama, which, if it points to anything, points to the same fateful lesson—that a man never sees the end of an evil he has once set going, and should therefore take good thought to himself ere he stirs hand or foot to put it in motion.

Momentous, surely, whether in Life or Drama, is this Third Act, for therein are human bodies and human souls being hurried towards a goal which is terrible enough even so

far as our eyes can follow it; and beyond that—who can guess the terrors and the horror? Wherefore may we well hold our breath a little while it is playing!

CHAPTER II

THE SHADOW OF A SIN

In the path of a story, as in one of the actual world, it is sometimes necessary to retrace our steps; and we have now to go back a short distance in the present journey—namely, to that evening when Bernard bade farewell to the little Priory which had so long sheltered him, and left his friend Clement to return alone to it.

It was with a heavy heart, and a face overcast by clouds, that the young priest slowly took his way back to the sacred building which had been more than a home to him, but which would henceforth be a home with one of its members missing from it. Not only for that day's doubtful doings, in which he himself had played a regretful part, and the yet greater doubts which threatened the darkening future, were Clement's thoughts filled with sadness; but also because he loved his friend truly and as a very brother, and mourned the step which that friend had taken, both for the evil which he saw was likely to spring of it, and for the barrier it would of necessity raise between them.

Something in Bernard's character, that was lacking in his companion, had from the first inclined Clement to a friendship

which had ripened as it had grown; and, for a similar reason, Bernard had been drawn towards the young priest, whose gentle nature seemed to supply him with the calm and restfulness wanting to his own more stirring temper. Each, indeed —and we have a better warrant for these reflections than our own fancy—furnished what was most deficient in the other. Clement was strong in the force that is called *moral*, and possessed the passive martyr courage which would have led him to face death and endure torture for a cause he deemed worthy of sacrifice. On his side, Bernard loved danger for danger's sake, and the readiness with which his hand followed the daring promptings of his heart filled with wonder the timid spirit of his companion, who, though he himself only desired peace and a quiet path, had a woman's half-terrified curiosity for the adventures he shrank from and yet admired.

At any rate, the two friends had been friends always, and had clung together from the first, giving and taking of their natures' best, an exchange which had been to their mutual welfare. Not a few times had Clement's counsel and persuasion kept back his hotter companion from some rash action, or saved him from the effects of it; while, almost as often, Bernard's strong arm and ready wit had come to his friend's rescue when the latter's share of these qualities would have served him badly. Once, when the pair were returning home late through the forest, Clement, who was walking a little in advance, had been suddenly attacked by a large wolf, and was so stricken with terror that he could do nothing but stare blankly at his assailant, and the affair would probably have gone ill with him had not Bernard, quickly running up,

seized the beast by the throat, and made an end of it with a blow of his monkish knife. Clement never forgot this service, though his friend had only laughed and treated it lightly, and it added one more link to the chain between them. On another occasion it had happened that Father Hubert, whose head was a little under the waves at the time, had offended Bernard by a coarse jest which our hero, sharply stung out of sense, was about to rebuke with a sound English buffet, and was only stayed from doing so by Clement, who caught his uplifted arm, and succeeded in dissuading him from that folly, as he had done from many a like one.

The friendly debt between them, however, had been more than balanced on Clement's side by the last sacrifice which he had made for Bernard, for it had left the young priest wounded in a vital part—he was oppressed with the sense of having consented to, and taken a chief share in, a grievous sin, the more burdensome to his soul as he was bound to keep it fast locked there from the eyes of his revered Superior, and to withhold from it the sweetening graces of confession and pardon.

Notwithstanding, it was less with sorrowful musing on his own fault, than with grief at the friendship which was lost to him, and troubled thoughts of the perils which threatened his strayed companion, that Clement's mind was moved as he took his way back to the little Priory—whose beloved walls, standing out darkly under the wooded hill-tops, seemed, as he drew near to them, to be half shorn of their old joy and glory.

When he passed through the gateway which led to the

domestic buildings, it so chanced that the first person he encountered was the venerable Prior himself; who, seeing him alone, and noting the troubled look on his face, at once made a sign which Clement as quickly read and followed, and presently the two were standing together in the same room whither Bernard had formerly been summoned before his strange meeting with his wounded brother.

Having shut-to the door, and made sure that no one was within hearing, the Prior said earnestly—

"Thou art late, my son, and thou comest back alone. I pray thee, hath aught befallen our brother who went hence with thee? I command thee, my son, to speak plainly, and to hide nothing from me."

Clement hesitated a moment, in doubt what to answer, and then said in a low tone—

"Truly, my Father, he hath not returned with me, nor, I fear, will he ever come back of his own freedom. I could not prevail to dissuade him from his purpose, and—thou knowest, Father, that I had no power to hinder him."

The Prior had long expected, at least feared, such an end to the struggle which he knew was raging in his young disciple's breast; but the blow came no softer because its shadow had fallen before it, and it was with grief-stricken looks, and in a voice which trembled with agitation, that he replied to the bearer of these ill-tidings.

"Thou couldst not have hindered him," he said half-sternly, half-sorrowfully, "but thou mightest have warned me sooner of the danger, which doubtless thou hadst some inkling of. This sin was not lightly begotten in a moment, and thou wert

his chief friend and companion, and ye had a liberty together which perchance I did wrong in so freely consenting to. Verily, I have been to blame, I fear I have walked blindly and have been much to blame, and this scandal will fall heavily on my grey hairs! Nevertheless, the Evil One hath set the snare for us, and God alone could have stayed our feet from falling into it!" Then he added with more decision—"I charge thee, my son, tell me truly how this thing happened? Whither hath our unhappy brother gone, and what hath been his purpose in thus fleeing from us?"

Clement had looked forward to this question with a trembling heart almost from the very hour when his friend had confided his fatal resolve to him, and now that the moment for answering had come he felt no better able to perform the task than when the thoughts of it had first faced him. If his heart, however, a little trembled, his mind was firmly fixed, and after a brief hesitation he said to the Prior—

"My Father, have I not ever obeyed thee in all thou hast been pleased to lay on me, and, so far as my feet were able, have I not always run in the path thou hast pointed out to me? I pray thee, have I ever kept back aught from thee, or deceived thee in any trust thou hast committed to me?"

The Prior laid his hand kindly on his follower's shoulder, while he replied to him—

"Thou hast ever been a good son and an obedient one, alike to me and to the Church we are both servants of; and, truly, I have done wrong to set my carnal affections on thy late companion, or to have bestowed on him, if in my blindness I have done so, any greater measure of favour than I

have given thee, for thou art indeed far worthier than he hath proved himself. But wherefore is this question, my son? What hath thy past service or thine obedience to do with the present trouble that hath fallen upon us?"

"I would pray thee," returned Clement with an earnest look of appeal, "not to question me concerning my companion's absence. I know that thou hast a right to demand of me what thou pleasest, and that I shall do a grievous wrong if I refuse to answer thee; but he is my friend as none other is, or hath ever been, and I have promised not to betray what he hath trusted to me; and I pray thee, my Father, to strain a point in thy kindness, and to grant me this one favour that I ask of thee."

"I would gladly grant thee any favour that my office permitteth," said the Prior gravely, "but for this, my son—thou knowest not what thou askest. The honour—nay, it may be even the wellbeing—of our Holy Church is concerned, and if aught is to be done to mend the present mischief it must be done quickly, and thou wilt indeed deeply offend if thou helpest not our hands by every endeavour that lieth in thee."

The Prior, who had always valued Clement—to weigh him in his own scales—as a faithful and obedient servant, but who had nevertheless deemed him lacking in the robuster qualities of manhood, was astonished at the look of firmness which came into the young priest's face as he made answer—

"I would die for our Church, my Father, but I cannot betray my friend—I will not break the word I have pledged to him. I entreat thee, put me not in peril of the sin thou hintest at."

"Thy friendship is a small thing, my son," rejoined the Prior, "compared with that higher relationship which claimeth thee, and thy promise is of little account in comparison with the Heavenly bond thou hast set thy seal to. Better to break with every Earthly faith—though I despise not Earthly friendship, nay, I have valued it too greatly—than to be false in thy fealty to God and His blessed Church! Verily, my son, I have done wrong in yoking thee and this erring brother so much together; for thou hast not proved strong enough, as under God's guidance I had hoped thou wouldst, to keep his feet from straying, and I fear he hath tempted thee from the straight path thou wert once happily minded to walk in."

Clement was greatly moved, and his purpose almost shaken, by the Prior's speech; but at that moment Bernard's words seemed to rise in his ears—"Not even if thou wert threatened with the Church's wrath, not even if thy loved office were put in peril?" and Clement remembered that he had replied steadfastly—"No, not even then"; and he resolved that he would not now, when the imagined peril had come, be less constant than when he had only uttered bold words concerning it. Bending his head humbly to the Prior, but speaking in a firm voice, he again answered—

"I am sorry, my Father, to be a cause of displeasure to thee, or of offence to our Holy Church. I have never yet wittingly disobeyed thee, and I pray thee to spare me the pain of now doing so, for I cannot betray the friend that hath trusted in me—I cannot break the faith I have given him."

"Thou doest not well, my son, for two reasons," said the Porir somewhat sternly: "first, because thou settest thyself

against my just authority; and secondly, because thou trustest not my kindness and wisdom in dealing with this strayed sheep thou callest thy friend—whom, truly, I have ever treated as mine own child, and am not likely to condemn more harshly than becometh both his and my necessity. But take thought to thyself, my son. Thou knowest to what thy disobedience may lead thee, and what punishment I may have to mete to thee."

"I wot it well, Father," returned Clement in a low voice, "and I am ready to bear all thou shalt be pleased to appoin for me. Nevertheless, my having offended thee will be my worst punishment; and I would it were my own heart thou didst now demand of me, for thou shouldst not have had to ask me twice for it—I would have come to thee without thy calling."

The Prior listened with a strange wonder to these unwonted words of resistance. Seemingly troubled by conflicting doubts, he for some time paced the room in silence; and Clement, watching him with an anxiety as much for his friend as for himself, was by turns moved to hope and fear by the changing sternness and kindliness which clouded and lighted the old man's face. Presently, the Prior drew near to him, and, again laying his hand on his shoulder, said in gentle tones—

"Verily, my son, thou hast stuff in thee which I had not dreamed of, and which haply may prove of good service to our cause in the troublous times that I fear are lying in wait for us. Thou art to blame for not trusting me with our brother's secret, but I will not press thee against thy sense of friendly faith to him, and I am even in doubt if it be not best that I remain in ignorance of what hath happened to him."

The Prior kept thoughtful silence for a few moments, and then went on—

"Thou hast proved thyself worthy, my son, of being entrusted with a secret of the carnal world, and thou wilt doubtless keep as faithfully one which concerneth a weightier interest—namely, that of our Holy Church and those who minister its blessed offices to this unthankful realm. Truly, my son, I grieve to say that rumours are rife both of lawless treasons within, and unjust jealousies and censurings from without; and though we are warned to expect such, it becometh us not the less to be on the watch; and it is enough to strive with our enemies at the gate, without being assailed by those in our own camp—the children who eat our bread, the brethren who wield our weapons, and who should be fighting our battle and shouting our war-cry, as God hath indeed called them to do. But verily, God lendeth and the Devil spendeth, and men reck not so long as they have the Devil's leavings!"

The Prior again paused, and again presently resumed—

"I once told this unhappy friend of thine, when he had done that grievous violence thou wottest of, that the little flame of his wrath might perchance kindle a consuming fire; and indeed, my son, it is very possible, for the fabric of our beloved Church is at present even as tinder, and ready for any spark to set it blazing. Thou seest, my son, how great a trust I place in thee; and, though I say not that the blow will fall, it befitteth every true son among us to stand staunch and steadfast, and not to lightly finger the carnal weapons that are now being pointed against us."

"I desire no better service than to fight for our blessed cause—yea, and to die for it also," said Clement earnestly; "and I promise thee, my Father, I will never betray the trust thou puttest into my keeping." Then he added—"I also thank thee, Father, for thy gracious kindness in permitting me to keep that other trust I besought thee for—indeed, Father, I shall ever be grateful to thee for thine indulgence, and I will endeavour to prove my thanks by serving thee better in all thou mayst be pleased to require of me."

"I believe thou hast God's grace in thee, and we have need of such soldiers at this time," answered the Prior, regarding the young priest with a warm look of approval. "I have told thee, my son, that in the present state of our Church any spark may set it in a flame, and it is our duty to watch heedfully that none come to it. For our brother who hath thus fled from us, and left his post like a faithless sentinel, I have long feared what hath now befallen him. Nevertheless, my son, he hath much that is fair and good in him; but he hath no gift for his holy calling, and pity was it—it greatly paineth my heart to own it—that he was ever constrained to lay his neck to a yoke which hath so sorely fretted it. Verily, I have been much exercised, since thou broughtest me the news of this trouble, what best befitteth my duty both to him and to our blessed Church; for if I put forth my authority and send to fetch him back, he will but renew his disobedience, and a worse scandal is like to spring of it: wherefore it seemeth better to leave him to his own ways, and let God deal with him as His wisdom ruleth, for it must not be that the whole meal be spoiled by one ill measure."

Once more the Prior paused, and then continued somewhat doubtfully—

"I like not, my son, to practise even the semblance of aught that deceiveth, for it is like borrowing the arms of the Evil One; but this is a case of great exception, and cometh, too, at a time of peculiar need, and I have to consider the wellbeing of our sacred cause rather than my own private wishes—nay, rather than my own sense of right and truth. For that cause, my son, and that we furnish not our enemies with a sharp weapon to use against us, I desire to keep this scandal from the world's ears—ay, and from our own ears also; for I wot that a great mischief often creepeth through a small crack, and all are not to be trusted as thou art."

"I wish but to prove worthy of thy trust in me," repeated Clement eagerly. "Show me the path, Father, thou wouldst have me to follow, and my feet shall not halt so long as I have breath or strength to run in it."

"Thou wilt find work enough, by and by, for thy feet and thy hands also," said the Prior with a grave smile. "For the present I only require thee to help me, as well as thy wits may, in mending this broken window. Methinks," went on the old man after a hesitating break, as though he found it hard to utter what his heart disliked—"methinks it will be better to have it thought that our erring brother hath been sent by us to some other House, and that that reason be given for his absence here. As I have told thee, I like not to practise deception; but, as I also told thee, we are now treading upon a doubtful ground, and haply God will pardon our means for

our motive—which, truly, is to save His Church from a great scandal, perchance a great peril."

Clement listened to his Superior's proposal with a respect that was a little mixed with wonder, but he only said in reply—

"What is right for the master is right for the servant, and I will carry out thy commands, my Father, as well as lieth in me. Doubtless this plan is the best for all concerned in it."

"Thou likest it not, my son," returned the Prior in a tone of sadness, "and I like it not, either: nevertheless, it is our only choice if we would shield the cause we both serve from the blow which threatens it. Thy friend, who hath put us into this strait, is not like thee or one of the other Brethren —he is not a common monk—nay, he is not a common man; and he cometh of a race that brooks neither to be conquered nor corrected. Moreover, he hath already been guilty of a deed of violence which the King, deeming him to be a knight, was pleased to approve of; but which, if his Grace knew what manner of man he is, would fail not to bring both him and us into grievous trouble. By God's mercy, that cloud hath almost passed from us; but the sky is even now darkened with another cloud, and if the two should chance to meet—verily, a heavy storm will burst upon us; and that, my son, is what I would fain try to hinder."

A thoughtful silence succeeded this speech, during which the two monks seemed to be deeply musing on the problem the Prior had just raised. In a while the latter added—

"There is still another cloud, my son, in this dark sky over our heads. I like not the strange enmity that is between

these brothers, and I cannot fathom it; but there is peril in it, and greater mischief may yet spring from it than my fears can find warrant of my reason."

These words almost savoured of the prophetical, for they were no sooner uttered than one of the younger Brethren opened the door, and informed the Prior that Sir Wilfrid Alderic had suddenly arrived and desired to see him on urgent business, an announcement that was followed the next moment by the entrance of the Knight himself. The latter, indeed, strode into the room with every sign of hot haste, and, doffing his cap to the Prior, said quickly—

"I crave pardon, Reverend Father, for this late visit, but the errand which bringeth me is excuse enough, and I think thou wilt say so when thou hast heard it."

The Prior gave an anxious look at Clement, and then motioned to the monk who had accompanied Sir Wilfrid to leave the room. After that he turned to the Knight, and said in a calm voice—

"Our help and counsel are ready at any hour, my son, and need no heralding. I pray thee to acquaint me with thy present errand. Thou mayst speak freely before our brother here, for he is both discreet and hath our full confidence; unless thou wouldst choose to confer alone with me, in which case——"

"It matters not," broke in Sir Wilfrid impatiently. "What I have to say to thee will soon be public enough, both to the King and thy monks also—save, indeed, thou canst speedily find a remedy for what I doubt not is thine own disorder."

"Thou speakest in the language of riddles, my son," replied the Prior coldly, "and riddles open readily only to him that hath the key to them. If I am to help thee in this matter, it were better for thee to speak plainly and to the point."

"By our Lady, thou shalt have the key!" rejoined the Knight in a defiant tone. "Being thine own, too, thou art more likely to fit the lock with it than I am."

The Prior stared at Sir Wilfrid for a few moments, as though in doubt whether he were not mad, or else suffering from one of Father Hubert's fleshly visitations. Nevertheless, suspecting that some matter of real consequence must lie behind the Knight's strange conduct, he said earnestly—

"Thou answerest riddles with riddles, my son. Tell me straightly what hath happened, and why thou comest here to me—why thou callest this calamity, if it indeed be one, a disease of ours, and why thou askest me to find a remedy for it?"

"Straightly, then," returned Sir Wilfrid, looking angrily at the two monks, "I have just left the worthy Knight, Sir Edmund Dunstan, and, by the Lord, I found him in a pitiful plight for an honourable gentleman—his peace and pride spoiled by some loose villain who hath stolen his daughter from him—this very night, while he was absent at my house—ay, even while we were setting our seals to the bond which in three days hence (God confound the knave that hath befooled me!) was to have given her into my keeping. That is the key thou askest for, Reverend Father, and a pretty riddle is it for thy guessing! By the mass, a modest piece of knavery, for the daughter of a knight and gentleman to be tricked out of her

father's house and from her own chamber—filched as lightly as if she were a stray coin or a common trinket! Moreover, by a canting hypocrite of a——"

"Thou knowest, then, the man which did this thing?" interrupted the Prior hastily. "I thought thou hadst been ignorant of that, my son." Then he added—"But art thou sure that Sir Edmund's daughter hath been thus taken from him? This is a serious matter thou tellest us of, Sir Knight, and it seemeth strange that a maiden should be *stolen*, as thou callest it, from her father's house; and that she should fly from it of her own will, loving thee, and about to be wedded to thee, seemeth stranger still. In truth, my son, of thine own showing, there is a mystery somewhere which needeth enlightening."

Sir Wilfrid stamped his foot with vexation, and the colour rose to his cheeks under the steady gaze which the Prior bent on him.

"By our Lady," he said haughtily, "I did not come to enlighten the mystery, but to ask thee to read it for me, and methinks it is not of interest to thee whether the lady loved me or no. It sufficeth that her father approved of the match between us, and that some villain for his own evil end hath robbed us both—Sir Edmund of a valued daughter, and me of a wife I loved and who was promised to me."

"Craving thy pardon, Sir Knight," replied the Prior, "if I am to read this riddle to thee, it *is* of interest whether the lady really loved thee, and it sufficeth not that her father approved of the proposed match. For what thou sayest beside, we know not yet of a surety whether there be any 'villain' such as thou speakest of in what hath happened. That seemeth not at

present proved; for if the maiden returned not thy love, it is possible she may have fled of her own choosing, and I gather from what thou sayest that there is no certain knowledge of any one having been in league with her."

Sir Wilfrid regarded the Prior with no very pleasant looks while he listened to this speech. The expression of rage, however, which had at first animated his features, presently gave way to a smile of malice, as he made answer—

"Thou seemest to be as well-informed of the matter as we ourselves are, Reverend Father; and perchance thou canst confirm, what at present we but suspect, that the thief we are seeking came from no less lofty a place than Heaven; whence, having a fancy for our poor pleasures here, he spread his wings and paid us a visit—a flying one, Reverend Father; which accounteth both for the mystery of his performance, and the easy way he hath since vanished from us."

The Prior did not bend his eyes beneath the glance of mocking enquiry which the Knight turned on him while uttering this sarcasm, but his face grew paler, and he with difficulty mastered himself sufficiently to say in reply—

"There are better weapons than sarcasm, my son, and more befitting both my age and office and thine own knighthood. If thou hast aught to charge against any one, whether it toucheth ourselves or another, I pray thee to speak plainly and without shifting. I, at least, have done nothing that putteth me in doubt of any man, and thy manner to me becometh not either my station or thy reverence. Thou hast once already accused thy brother, and——"

"And I accused him rightly," broke in Sir Wilfrid with

angry impatience. "Faith, Reverend Father, thou didst then deny his guilt until his own confession of it made his innocence and thy defence of him impossible!"

"I told thee then, and I tell thee again now," returned the Prior somewhat warmly, "that the fault he committed, while I defended it not, had yet a great excuse for it, and that I thought it ill-became thee to be thine own brother's accuser. Moreover, Sir Knight—for I perceive thou art once more aiming at the same mark—it followeth not because he hath been to blame for one offending that he should of necessity be deemed guilty of another—an offence, too, for which he had no motive, of which none hath the least suspected him."

"I pray thee but to send for him here," retorted Sir Wilfrid with a look of malicious triumph. "If he deny it to my face and in thy presence, I will own to some fair doubts of what I have hinted."

The Prior was now in the position of one who is penned in a corner which he has himself got into. He could not send for Bernard; and that being the case, he had come to the end of his arguments. In this dilemma he looked appealingly to Clement; but Clement, who was the best informed of the three, had no comfort to give him, but, oppressed with his own share of misdoing, turned away his eyes from his Superior's gaze. At length, the silence and the sense of the Knight's contemptuous triumph becoming unbearable, the Prior took heart again to speak, and, in a voice that trembled a little despite his efforts to control it, said to his visitor—

"This is a serious charge, my son, which thou now hintest at. I pray thee, tell me plainly what giveth thee a suspicion

that thy unhappy brother hath had a hand in the present wickedness?"

"Because," answered the Knight with a readiness that contrasted sadly with the hesitation and doubtful looks of his two auditors, "he hath ever had the insolence to thrust himself between me and this lady who hath been so strangely lost to us. Thou knowest how he began by nearly murdering me in yonder forest, and, after that, leading home the fair prize of his valour to her father's house; since which I believe he hath often met with her, and it was but lately that Sir Edmund discovered them holding a moonlight vigil together in the glade near his castle-gate—for which freedom he rated his daughter soundly, and for better keeping had her locked in her own chamber; whence," added Sir Wilfrid with a fierce laugh of enjoyment at the Prior's fallen face, "I doubt not my saintly brother hath now delivered her."

The worthy Prior had certainly the look of a hard-pressed garrison in a beleaguered fortress. The present charge, indeed, was not yet proved, and perhaps might turn out to be false; but putting together Bernard's absence at the very time of the lost lady's disappearance, and the suspicious meetings between the pair just mentioned by the accusing Knight, he could not help owning that the matter was at least doubtful, and his late experience had somewhat painfully opened his eyes to the young monk's vocation for heroic adventures. If, however, the Prior were like a desperate garrison, he also resembled a gallant one; and, gathering himself up, he resolutely prepared to make the best stand he could against his triumphant enemy.

"Truly, Sir Knight," he said in a firm voice, and using almost the same words as in a former interview, "I cannot believe that thy brother hath so far forgotten his duty to God and us as to be guilty of the thing thou now chargest him with. Nevertheless, if he hath indeed done so, thou mayst rest assured that he shall be dealt with as his sin deserveth; but the offence is not yet proved—nay, it is little more than a random guess—and I would pray thee until it be so, both for the sake of our Church and thine own family, to leave the matter where it lieth, nor let in the wind of public gossip to blow on it."

"I will promise nothing!" exclaimed Sir Wilfrid violently. "By the mass, I have borne enough for my family, and for the Church, too! When this pious brother of mine slew my dearest friend, and brought both my name and his own calling into peril, at thy request I forbore to take any note of it, and I have kept my word to him and thee. Now, faith, he hath spoiled the honour of another friend, and robbed me of a plighted bride, and, by Heaven, I mean not to reckon any longer the bonds of Church or of brotherhood, which he hath himself chosen to break asunder! Thou sayest that the charge is not proved. I tell thee, Reverend Father, I am now going to seek the proofs—ay, and to seek him also; and if, as I doubt not, the one fitteth the other, I swear to thee he shall not escape my vengeance either because he is a false monk or the falser brother thou art pleased to remind me of!"

"Thou forgettest that thou art a Christian, and thou hast ill-learned the lessons I have myself taught thee," said the Prior in a severe tone. "What is vengeance, my son,

what are even thy worst wrongs and disappointments, to the evil thou art now considering for thine own soul and that of a fellow-sinner — thine own brother, my son — yea, thine own flesh and blood, in spite of all thou sayest and dost seek to hide from thy blinded conscience? Moreover, my son, what are any man's shame and sorrow—what were the sorest shame and sorrow which the best of us might be called to suffer—to the harm thou mayst perchance bring on our blessed religion by thy threatened rashness? Truly, Sir Knight, we are not all faithless shepherds, and thou wilt do well to take heed that thou hinderest not the work of God by hearkening to the Devil's voice and the whispers of thine own evil passions."

"Methinks," rejoined Sir Wilfrid with a sneer, "that it would be as well, Reverend Father, if the bad shepherds were kept out of the fold, for, certes, instead of frightening away the wolves, they are themselves sometimes minded to devour the sheep; and though I doubt not that the good shepherds are plentiful, there are enough of the other kind to set the poor flock wondering whether it is much the better for its tender guardians! For myself, Reverend Father, when I feel the teeth running into me I shall not look whether it be from wolf or shepherd, but shall strike as hard and sharply as my strength will serve me."

The old Prior's cheeks flushed hotly, and his eyes blazed with an almost forgotten wrath, as he listened to this insult. Drawing himself up, and speaking with a command which forced even the scornful Knight into a show of respect, he said sternly—

"I perceive, Sir Knight, that thou hast given thy heart to this carnal world, and thy service to the enemies of our holy religion: nevertheless, take heed ere thou liftest thyself against a power that is very easily able to set thee down, and which the proudest and strongest of Earth's great ones could never shake, but have themselves trembled before. Verily, I am only among the humblest of its ministers; but if thou darest to raise thy least finger as thou now threatenest, if thou presumest to wreak thy wicked lust on this servant who is committed to my charge — whose ruling and punishing are given to me alone—yea, and I stand at God's footstool here to do His judgment in the place appointed me—I promise thee, Sir Knight, that I will cause a vial of wrath to fall upon thee such as even thy stiff neck shall meekly bend beneath —nay, Sir Knight, methinks thou knowest what is our power, and that thou wilt rather choose to stoop thy knee to it than vainly offer to stand against it!"

The Knight very well knew what was threatened him, and also, as the Prior had hinted, that even his stubborn pride was unequal to contend against it. This, indeed, in spite of the fury which filled him, he at once recognised, and without further debate made up his mind to abandon the ground he stood on—only yielding that position, however, as sometimes happens in a real battle, to take possession the next moment of a better one.

"Be it as thou commandest, Reverend Father," he said with a mocking air of penitence, "and I pray thee pardon a poor son of the world for having presumed to bandy words with thee. I see how greatly in error I was in offering to

deal with mine own wrong with mine own hands; for the punishment I proposed would have been compassed too privately, and would therefore have lost half its worth as a wholesome warning. I will e'en take thy hint, Reverend Father, and relieve my hands of a troublesome burden, which, as thou sayest, is too heavy for me—only choosing my own judge and my own judgment-court; and, since the matter is as much secular as sacred, it will doubtless be as fit for the King's ruling as either thine, Reverend Father, or that of his potent Grace of Canterbury."

Having delivered which shaft, and waiting neither to watch its effects nor to receive any reply to it, Sir Wilfrid turned himself about, and strode leisurely from the room; leaving the Prior with the uncomfortable sense of having in no wise bettered his position, or that of the Church he had been contending for, by aught he had said or done.

For some time after the Knight had departed the two monks remained in thoughtful silence, which was at length broken by the elder saying to the younger—

"Thou seest, my son, that thy secret is no longer in thine own keeping. I therefore pray thee to speak plainly to me; for it is needful that we confer together, and use our best wisdom to set straight—if it be yet in our power to do so—this evil mischance which hath fallen upon us, and it may be that thy knowledge will prove of great help."

Clement reflected a moment, and then answered—

"Pardon me, my Father, if I seem to be making a condition with thee where I wot well thou hast the right to command me; but I would fain ask thee if thou dost purpose to use this

knowledge against our unhappy brother who hath been the occasion of the present trouble?"

"No, my son," replied the Prior in the quiet tone of one whose mind is made up, "I purpose only to use what thou tellest me for the weal of our threatened Church; for whose advantage—and I have considered it very deeply—it seemeth best to me that our misguided brother should be left to his own and God's ruling—nay, I would even gladly learn that he hath fled from this place, and is beyond our seeking. Thou mayst therefore speak freely, my son, and without hindrance."

Sheltered by this assurance, and seeing that his further silence would not avail his friend, while, as the Prior had hinted, it might imperil his beloved Church, Clement resolved to speak, and gave his Superior a short history of Bernard's relations with Rosamond, from their first meeting in the little glade, to that final tryst when the girl had sought deliverance from her father's and Sir Wilfrid's persecution by flying to her lover's arms. The young priest, while he described his own struggles and endeavours both with himself and the partner of his misdoing, did not forget to defend his absent friend, warmly picturing the doubts that had racked Bernard's heart and mind, the temptations he had encountered, and the good resolves he had formed, which only the fatal design of the two knights had conspired to make a wreck of. Lastly, he related how, after a sharp conflict, and much stormy communing with his own spirit, he had himself joined the pair in wedlock; an act of complaisance which he had at first firmly refused, but which, since his friend was bent on his purpose, and even hinted that he would find another to perform

that service for him, Clement had in the end yielded to, judging it better for the Church's interest that the matter should be in his keeping than entrusted to a stranger or one who might use it less worthily.

When Clement had ended his account, the old man turned to him with a sad expression, and said gravely—

"Thou hast committed a great fault, my son—nay, almost thou hast sinned worse than the friend thou soughtest to shelter. The offence were a grievous one in any case; but for the daughter of an honoured knight, a man much valued by the King himself, it is indeed a blow we shall not lightly miss the falling of. I doubt not thou didst act as seemed well, ay, and wise, to thee; but it is neither wise nor well to sow evil that we may reap good, and it was thy duty to have come to me at the first, and to have warned me of our brother's peril. Hadst thou done so, my son—from how much mischief should both we, and thy friend also, have been hindered!"

Clement bowed his head in silence beneath this rebuke, which he felt was lighter than became his merits; and the Prior went on—

"I will not now speak to thee of punishment, my son. Methinks thy soul hath already suffered for thy fault worse than we have power to inflict on thy body, and that this day's bitter fruit will be a lesson to thee not again to make an alliance between thy carnal affections and thy sacred duty. For thy unhappy friend, our fallen brother——" Here the Prior paused a moment, as though overcome by emotion, and then added the words from which we have taken the title of

this chapter—"Truly, my son, this evil sorrow is the shadow of a sin, and God letteth it fall in a heavy hour! Great as is our brother's trespass, and greatly as I grieve for it, and for him also, he is not all to blame—nay, my son, he hath many noble qualities, which might have made him and the world he dwelleth in the better and the brighter for them had not the Devil or man's wickedness choked with foul tares the fair promise of his harvest! Verily, all these evils that have befallen us, and maybe greater ones yet to follow, are the fruit of that one sin which thou perchance wottest of, and it is enough to make the stoutest sinner pause ere he taketh up such a burden!"

Having thus spoken, the Prior, with bent head and a sad mien, moved towards the door, and Clement, as sadly following him, deemed the interview at an end; but suddenly, just as he was about to pass out of the room, the old man turned back again, and said in a low voice which a little trembled—

"I have promised thee, my son, not to seek for this erring brother of ours, and I will keep my word to thee; but remember—though I loved him as my own child—yea, and I do so love him—if it should be the will of Heaven to bring him back to me, or if a greater need should compel me to send for him, as perchance through his own rashness may yet happen, I should not scruple to punish him as his offence deserveth—nay, the more so, rather, for all the love and care that have been bestowed on him; and I pray thee, my son, to bear what I have now said to thee in thy remembrance."

And with these words the Prior left the room.

CHAPTER III

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

On the morning after Mistress Edith's visit to Sir Edmund Dunstan, Father Hubert had been instructed by his tormentor to himself call at the little castle, and discover as best he could the effect of the arrow she had shot into it. The unlucky monk, therefore, with many inward doubtings and some outward grumblings, set forth upon his thankless errand, with about as much joy as a condemned man travelling to his own execution, and with less certainty as to the consequence.

The burly priest, indeed, was not a happy man. He had once, before Fate pointed him out to Mistress Edith, been (so far as that is possible) an indifferent one; but that time was past, and his soul, which was formerly an inappreciable burden, began to rival in weight his ponderous body, thus turning the tables on the latter, which had hitherto almost crushed its modest tenant out of dwelling-room. It seemed, truly, as though these two divisions of his being were incompatible, for no sooner did his soul begin to grow, or elbow itself out, than his body took to languishing and becoming thinner; whether from an abstract resentment of the intrusion, or because the poor monk's appetite had of late declined—due, doubtless, to the same cause, to wit, that his body had less room left in it—it is difficult to determine; but the fact remained that his bulk was diminishing, if not alarmingly, at least markedly so, and in any case the phenomenon was notable.

Father Hubert must at this time have been greatly exercised by the petticoat tyranny he had become subject to, for it is recorded by our Chronicler that on one occasion he improved on the version of creation given in Holy Writ by declaring that "while God made the man the Devil had fashioned the woman," refusing to admit that the latter's folly in first yielding to the tempter, and her subsequent sin in persuading her partner, sufficiently accounted for the perverse qualities of what the persecuted monk never again called the "weaker" sex.

However that may have been, Father Hubert cursed the day which had made him acquainted with this particular descendant of Eve, and it was in the very worst of humours even for a plain man, let alone a holy monk, that he saddled his mule and rode forth on the errand prescribed him by Mistress Edith.

When he at length reached the end of his journey, the portly priest was more than ever puzzled how to perform his mission. If the old soldier, Redwald, had been put to pains to avoid being seen by the inhabitants of the castle, his own difficulty, on the contrary, was to attract the notice of any living soul within it—if, indeed, living soul were there at all, for the whole place wore the air of death, or at least of desertion; and Father Hubert, after thundering at the door until his arm ached, and staring up at the windows until his eyes watered, was about resigning himself to the inevitable—an inevitable not without its consolation—when a head appeared suddenly at one of the upper lights, and a voice called out to him to tarry an instant longer while the speaker came down to let him in.

The above head and voice belonged to old Oswald, who had for some time been watching Father Hubert, and carefully taking his measure, from that airy post just alluded to. Now it chanced that at the same moment—to wit, Father Hubert's arrival—the old soldier was about setting forth in quest of a priest, and, seeing by his dress that the present visitor was one, almost regarded the latter's advent as the special work of Providence, though, as it happened, this was far from being the case. Nevertheless, while anxiously desiring a priest, the jolly Father was the last of his reverend Order whom Oswald would have chosen, and it was the doubtful debate he had been holding with himself as to whether or no he should make use of the monk's services which had kept that unconscious ambassador so long waiting at the gate. Having at last, however, decided that the office is better than the man, and that the worst fish in a net is worth more than the best one out of it, the old servant descended to the hall, and, opening the door, let in his portly visitor; as he did so, saying—

"Good day to thee, Reverend Father, and I crave thy grace for keeping thee so long waiting. Truly, Father, thou comest at a fitting time, and methinks Heaven itself must have sent thee here."

Mistress Edith was certainly not Father Hubert's own notion of Heaven, and he almost forgot his sacred character in the blank look of astonishment which he turned on the old soldier. However, it was no little comfort to him to find that he was welcome, since, knowing that the Knight was neither famous for his love of monks nor for his tolerance of intrusion, he had had some misgivings as to the reception likely to be

accorded him, and this doubt, at any rate, was now smoothed from the troublesome path he walked on.

"I am glad, my son," he said with a more assured air, "that I come at a convenient season, for I travelled hither to have some speech with thy good master, Sir Edmund Dunstan. I pray thee, is the Knight within, and hath he leisure for me?"

Father Hubert, in his perturbation over his unwelcome errand, had not noticed the sad looks and other signs of mourning wherewith Oswald was clouded; nor was he struck by the melancholy tones in which the old servant answered—

"Follow me, Reverend Father, and thou shalt e'en see him. He is within, and hath leisure enough, and there is no need for me to go before thee to prepare a welcome."

Saying which, Oswald, followed by Father Hubert, led the way up the staircase, and, softly opening the door of what had been the late Knight's chamber, bade his companion to enter, pointing as he did so to a bed near the centre of the room, and adding in a whisper—

"There he lieth, Reverend Father. He cannot speak to thee; but thou canst speak to him—or rather for him, Reverend Father—and I beg of thee to say thy best prayers to God and our Blessed Lady for him."

Father Hubert started as hardly he had done when he perceived the Prior gazing in at him through the sick Knight's window; for there, pale and shrouded on the bed of death, in the darkened room, looking the ghastlier for the light of the wax candles which threw a sickly gleam over it, lay the body of the man he had come to speak with. For some

moments the astonished monk could only stare with dilated eyes, and his bulky limbs all in a tremble, at the motionless figure before him. At length he recovered himself sufficiently to gasp faintly—

"I pray thee tell me—how hath this thing happened? Jesu save us, it is awful—'tis a very sudden visitation!"

The old soldier, who took this emotion for a genuine display of feeling, and was much drawn to the monk in consequence, laid his hand on the latter's arm, and in a hoarse voice replied—

"It is indeed sudden, Reverend Father, and, as thou sayest, very awful; but it was not a message from God, as thou deemest it. Mass, no! He was struck down by a villain's hand—by a bloody traitor who stole his daughter from him, and then slew him to stay his tongue from asking for her! I tell thee, Father, he was murdered last night, in his own room—coldly murdered by a villain who weareth thy clothes—a damned monk—I crave thy pardon, Reverend Father—who hath disgraced thy sacred service, and spoiled mine of the best master that ever a man wrought for!"

The perturbed priest responded to the above speech by a groan deep enough for a funeral-note, and Oswald, interpreting this as another symptom of sorrow, exclaimed with fervour—

"Thou doest well to mourn for him, Reverend Father, though thou mayst not have known him as I have done, for verily he was the best man and the kindest master—ay, and the faithfullest friend, and truest servant to King and State—that ever God's light shone upon! But he shall not die unavenged—mass, no! I have sworn on yonder sword which

pierced him not to take him from that bed of his till I have made him even with the villain who betrayed and slew him; and I will keep my oath—I will keep my oath to him!"

The old soldier paused a moment, trembling with excitement; and then, kneeling reverently by the bed, and kissing the hand of his dead master, added in a stern whisper—

"Sleep thy sleep in peace, my murdered master! The King will soon be here, and he knoweth thy worth which is lost to him, and we will see if he doth not reckon with the villain who hath betrayed thee—ay, we will see if such things may be done in England!"

Father Hubert's mind was not so moidered but what he caught these last words, and their meaning also. Laying his hand on Oswald's shoulder, as the old man rose from his knees, he said earnestly—

"I pray thee, my son, leave vengeance to God Who judgeth us. Thou hast lost a worthy master, and the world a valued servant; but thou wilt not mend either it or thyself by what thou now purposest, and thou mayst perchance cause a greater mischief than that thou seekest to straighten—yea, an evil far greater than thou dreamest of."

Oswald looked moodily at his adviser, and his manner became colder and more constrained, as he made answer—

"If an angel came down from yonder Heaven, he should not persuade me from seeking vengeance for this wrong, and thou art not like to succeed better than such a pleader!" Then, as though suddenly bethinking him of his present object, he again changed, and said in a more cordial tone—"Forgive me, Reverend Father, if I spake rudely to thee. I meant no

offence, but I cannot follow thy counsel in this matter. If thou wilt have the grace to do so, I entreat thee to say some prayers for my poor master there. He was a good man enough, God wotteth; but he will be the better for thy sacred offices, and I will pay well for the trouble thou shalt take for him."

The monk signified his willingness to do what was asked of him, and his companion then left the room, saying that he would await his visitor down-stairs; and the next moment Father Hubert, much against his inclination, found himself alone with the dead Knight, whose grisly form he half-expected, with every movement of the wind and flicker of the candles, to rise up and demand a dreadful account from him.

In the devotions which followed, when he at length gained confidence enough to make the venture, the perturbed priest prayed almost as much for himself as for the motionless object he knelt beside. The whilom-jolly monk was, indeed, grievously sobered. In that lonely chamber, and before that terrible presence—the more terrible for its breathless silence—Father Hubert felt the new burden of his soul weigh heavily on him—felt, more especially, that *he* was the real guilty one, the actual murderer; and that but for his drunken babbling, his wanton yielding to sensual lust, this bloody accident might never have happened. In his trembling remorse he cried aloud and accused himself, beseeching Heaven and the victim of his misconduct to forgive him; but then, scared at the sound of his own voice, he started in terror, fearful that the dead man at all events, of whom he stood the most in awe, would perhaps answer him. The hushed lips moved not,

it was true—no more than when the monk had first entered; but at any moment they might do so, and Father Hubert, in his excited fancy, had a horrible sense that the soul of his fearsome charge was all this while hovering about it and himself, and noting, with the cynical interest which had once distinguished the living Knight, everything he did or said.

Notwithstanding all this, Father Hubert prayed, and with an earnestness which was like a new birth in him—both for the Knight's soul, that it might be happier in its changed sphere; and for his own, that it might do better in the present one. In his case the monk's petition seemed to have been answered, at least in part, for his fears gradually grew less violent, and he felt the sense of a burden lightened—whatever other result, present or future, he rose from his knees with a good resolution, and that was like a first milestone in the progress of Father Hubert's soul.

What was perhaps even more remarkable, as showing the rapid growth of this new claimant to power, and its successful invasion of its ponderous rival's territory—the monk's fat body—was the fact that, when he presently descended to the hall, Father Hubert was actually moved to decline the substantial creature comforts which the grateful Oswald offered him, including, *mirabile dictu!* some old sack of the first quality. This victory, sooth to say, was not gained without some sharp skirmishing with the enemy, during which each side advanced and retreated more than once, nor, it must be confessed, without a few faint twinkles—due to mere force of habit—from the jolly priest's eyes; but in the end the soul had the better of the body, and, despite the latter's grumblings and

lamentings, triumphantly led off their common owner (who had indeed been little else in the affair than a spectator) to a fresh field and further glory.

Having left the deceased Knight's house, Father Hubert, at a slow pace and with deeply-musing mind, took his way back through the forest and to the expectant lady who awaited him. St. Luke's "little summer" was wellnigh past, but the gleam of its glory yet lingered in the glowing russet of the woods and the ruddy crimson of the fern on the hills above, and the lightened spirit of the monk took note of and rejoiced in these things as it had not done since its master was a careless child. Nature's mild ministry followed well—like a blessing after a sermon—the stern lesson of the chamber of death; and the heart of this strange pupil, having cast out a portion of its evil, suddenly found the vacancy filled with something new, and withal better, and straightway began wondering at it, glad yet thoughtful, like Undine marvelling over the mysterious gift of a soul.

When, a little later, he sat waiting in Mistress Edith's bower-room, with the iron effigy of Sir Eustace as his sole companion, the lesson was resumed, but his mind was better prepared for it. Nevertheless, the task was a hard one. All around him were the witnesses of his fatal folly—dumb witnesses, as they are called, but which could not have spoken to him more eloquently had they possessed tongues of fire. Father Hubert reckoned them all, from that stern figure of armour, which formed the prologue to the tragedy, to the very table whereon his head had fallen in drunken sleep after he had whispered his unlucky secret; and while he thus

communed with this ghostly company, three favourable signs of the monk's changed mood showed themselves—he dared to look his fault steadily in the face; he thought not of lying, either to himself or any one else (including the Prior); and he felt no desire for his old remedy of the Ostrich kind, his once-beloved and still-remembered sack.

This last evidence was the more notable since Father Hubert was really thirsty, having drunk nothing for some hours, and having, as we know, declined the only refreshment which had been offered him. Indeed, on Mistress Edith's entrance soon afterwards, that lady could hardly have shown more astonishment at an earthquake than she displayed when, after proposing to her guest a bumper of his favourite wine, he repeated his former victory by refusing it.

"By our Lady, Reverend Father," she exclaimed with a heartier laugh than had for many a day escaped her, "what hath happened to thee? Hast thou suddenly changed thy cell for a cave? Since when, I pray thee, hast thou taken this strange sickening for thy cherished sack?"

If Mistress Edith had been astonished at the jolly monk's refusal of her wine, she was still more surprised by his reply to her question.

"Since the hour when thou first gavest it me in this room and at that table," he said in a tone which made the lady look at him with increasing wonder—"since the time when thou didst steal that cursed secret from me, which I, like the drunken beast I was, let thee take out of me as if I had been a senseless casket, and thou a key which had but to turn in the lock and open me!"

Father Hubert, who, not reckoning the sacred readings prescribed him by his rule, had never before been known to utter so many serious words in one sentence, paused a moment, and then went on—

"God wotteth I knew not the evil that would fall of it, or I—even I—beast and fool as I verily was—had not suffered thee and the Devil to make the slave of me ye both contrived to! But I was a coward none the less—yea, truly, a base coward, and a liar also; and what is worse—God forgive thee, and my own soul for yielding to thee!—a damnable murderer! Heaven have mercy on me—I say, a damnable murderer!"

Mistress Edith could only stare at the monk with blank eyes: she was, at any rate, no longer able to laugh at him; and was probably a little scared, deeming him to have gone mad. Presently Father Hubert added—

"But, at least, I will be a coward and liar no longer. I will be a slave no more to thee and that cursed sack of thine—the Lord and our Blessed Lady help me, I will play what little of the man is left in me! I blame thee not for what thou hast done to me, for verily I alone am to blame for all this wickedness—I, a priest of God, and a chosen teacher of others, to lend a hand to thee in thy damnable desires, and help thee to shed the blood of an innocent fellow-being—one, too, that never did wrong or spite to me—no, nor to thee, neither! But I warn thee, mistress, I will be thy slave, and the Devil's that wrought with thee, no longer! Thou didst hold me bound to thee, coward that I was, by thy threat to acquaint the Prior of me. I tell thee, thou mayst now go to

him, and show him all that hath fallen between us—nay, whether thou goest or not, I shall myself plainly show him what hath happened—but I will be thy slave no longer in this bloody work of thine!"

Mistress Edith now fancied that she could see a little light in this mysterious darkness.

"Truly, Father," she said quietly, "thou makest a great cry over an old hurt. Thou knewest very well that I sought for vengeance on my Knight's slayer; and I have never treated thee as a slave, though it is true I made use of thee for accomplishing my purpose. In any case, that is now ended—at least, so far as concerneth thee; and thou art free to go as soon as thou choosest, and there was no occasion for thee to make such a clamour over it. As for the man I desired to be revenged on, thou art innocent of aught that may have happened to him; and if his blood hath indeed been shed, as thou seemest to hint, he well deserved what hath befallen him, and methinks thou canst hardly deny that justice."

"By our Lady, I do deny it!" exclaimed Father Hubert with great energy. "What, I pray thee, had the old man done to thee, or to thy Knight either, that his grey hairs should be made bloody in his own gore? The Lord wotteth 'tis a shameful deed, and one which both of us will be called to a sharp account for!"

Mistress Edith once more stared at the monk, this time with looks of mingled anxiety and questioning wonder.

"Thou art gone mad, Father," she said at last, "or else thou hast drunk stronger sack on thy way hither than I offered thee. Thou knowest this fellow better than I do, who have

never even looked on him; and thou wottest well that he is neither old nor hath grey hair, but is young and lusty enough, as thou hast thyself described him. What meanest thou by this fool's jesting?"

"I am not jesting," replied Father Hubert, whose looks certainly showed no glimmer of mirth in them, "though I deny not that I am a fool, and a very sorry one. I tell thee I have just seen the dead body of the old Knight, Sir Edmund Dunstan, and he was killed last night by the man thou sentest to fight with him. By our Lady, didst thou expect one of his years to overcome a youth who worsted the King's Champion?"

Mistress Edith, on hearing these words from her late confederate, gave a cry of grief and rage that moved even the pity of the indignant Father.

"I tell thee," she gasped, when at length she was able to make any answer, "I had no thought of this horrible thing thou sayest hath happened. I never dreamed that this villain I sent to him would lift his hand against yonder old man—the father of her he professeth to love—whose blood, truly, was her blood, whose breath was as that of her own bosom! Verily, I am foiled—I am fooled—yea, doubly fooled and worsted! With one blow robbed of the vengeance I have so hardly wrought for, and saddled with a crime I had no need of, no desire for—which Heaven—ay, and perchance my dead Knight also—will blame and curse me for!"

As the excited lady paused in her utterance, Father Hubert bethought him to say something which he deemed applicable both to her and himself in the unhappy situation they had got themselves into; but before he had time to open his lips

Mistress Edith again spoke, exclaiming in a loud voice and with added passion—

"But I tell thee he shall not die unavenged—this malignant monster shall not go unpunished! Verily, I have now a double vengeance to visit on his accursed head, and I swear to God I will not rest till I have made him equal with those two lives he hath laid so bloodily! I call thee to bear me witness, Father——"

"Call not upon me," interrupted Father Hubert hastily. "I will be a witness to no more bloodshed, and I will not again have any part in thy wicked schemes of wrath and vengeance. Truly, if God giveth me so much of His grace, I wot not that all my life that is yet left me, though it be spent in penitence and blessed deeds, will prove enough to clear my soul of this foul blot on it! For thyself, daughter, I advise thee to look to thy mending also. It beseemeth not me to preach a sermon to thee, nor perchance to any other; but indeed thou givest thy soul too much to heathenish thoughts of wrath and vengeance, and thou wilt do better to leave punishment to God Who judgeth the need of it. I pray thee, daughter, be content with what hath already fallen, and leave this unhappy sinner thy heart lusteth against to God's rendering and his own repenting."

Mistress Edith paused in her wrath while she listened, with what was in her a wonderful display of patience, to Father Hubert's long discourse. When he had ended she turned on him a look so sharp and sudden that, despite his newly-donned coat of courage, it caused the nervous monk to flinch from her as he might have done from one of the frowns of her late

Champion. As he thus shrank from her the lady scanned him with an amused smile that was not pleasant.

"Truly, thou art a weak creature," she said, with a sort of pity that was the next of kin to scorn: "thou blowest hot and thou blowest cold, but thou meanest as well as thy nature letteth thee. By our Lady, dost thou think I have no thoughts save for wrath and vengeance, as thou callest them? I tell thee I have forgiven worse wounds than thy wit hath yet dreamed of, and I never harboured harm to living thing till this accursed devil came between me and the only joy my wrongs had left to me! But thou understandest neither my cause nor my sorrow, and it matters nothing. Henceforth our paths run in parted ways, and we are not like to meet again. I am sorry to have singed thy wings in my fire; but at least thou needest not fear that I shall speak of thee to thy Prior or to any other man—nor, indeed, should I ever have so used thee; and had it not been for thine own faint terrors, thou mightest have known that it would ill-become my worth to have thus demeaned myself."

With which comforting reflection for the unlucky Father—that he had sinned without necessity—the cynical lady went to a corner of the room, and, opening a drawer, drew forth a somewhat bulky bag, which she offered to her downcast companion, saying as she did so—

"I pray thee take this money, Reverend Father. It is the present which I promised thee, and I wot thou hast well-earned it. If thou scruplest to make use of it for thine own pleasure, thou canst employ it in those blessed deeds thou hast just spoken of."

This last reminder of his misdoing served to rouse a little the drooping courage of the perplexed priest. He looked up quickly, and seemed about to speak with a show of his late resolution; but the next instant he faltered again, and said nothing. His interview with Mistress Edith appeared, indeed, to have had the effect of leading him back into the old path he had so recently quitted—either from force of habit, or by the influence of a will stronger than his own. It was plain that a desperate and doubtful struggle was waging in the monk's mind: even that ancient trick of his ventured at this moment to return to the vacant theatre of its past triumphs—his eyes twinkled with a glimmer of their former brilliance at the sight of the proffered money-bag, and at the sound of the chinking coin within it. The good angel, if any such there were, who watched over Father Hubert's destiny must have trembled at this particular point in the battle that was being fought—perchance may have dropped upon the contending legions some pitying tears, which haply fell on and dimmed those foremost foes of his, the triumphant twinkles, and so put an end to the feud, as rain puts out a fire; for all at once the straitened monk looked up again with a face firm and grave as that of the Prior himself: not the ghost of a twinkle lurked in the clouded heaven of his eyes; while in a voice that had no doubt or distrust in it, but which rang with clear decision in every note, he said to the mocking lady—

"I will not take a stiver of thy present, daughter—neither for my own pleasure, for I mean no more to give my heart to the things thou hintest at; nor for the poor, for I doubt the price of blood would not prosper the hands that touched it.

As thou sayest, our paths are henceforth widely parted. God be with thee, daughter, and grant His grace to thee, and to me also. I forgive thee freely any wrong thou hast done to me. Do thou, in thy turn, forgive this unhappy sinner who hath offended thee."

In this manner the monk and the lady made an end of their strange partnership, letting go their gripped hands as the storm they had raised burst upon them, and as the boat they rowed in was beginning to drift—the latter of the pair floating away on the dark flood of wrath and passion whose swelling billows threatened to sink and drown her; the former clinging high and dry to the rock he had laid desperate clutch on, for once in his watery course having had heart enough to stretch out an arm to help himself, and soul enough (or stomach, if any prefer the figure) to stem the tide and give the sack to the Devil.

CHAPTER IV

A MESSAGE FROM THE TOMB

It was a fatality of the present entangled path he walked in that the first deliberate deceit (according to our Chronicler) which Bernard had ever been guilty of should have been practised on the being he loved best and would least of all the world have dealt falsely with. While fondly welcoming him on his return from his mysterious errand, Rosamond had suddenly started in alarm at the sight of a dark blood-stain

upon his clothes, and Bernard had relieved her fears, and his own also, by telling her that he had been attacked by a wolf in the forest, and that the blood she looked on belonged to the beast which he had slain. This shift satisfied Rosamond, and moreover accounted (although she thought it strange in him) for her companion's disordered looks; but the lie lay heavily on Bernard's soul, and in his excited fancy he took it as a sign of Heaven's anger, and the beginning of the chastisement that was adjudged him. Making an excuse to wash away the stains which had scared her, he hastily quitted Rosamond, and seeking his faithful ally and follower, who had been awaiting him with almost as much anxiety as the girl herself, gave him an account of the whole night's dark doings, from the fateful summons of Oswald to the final tragedy which had sprung of it; ending his relation by asking the old soldier whether aught were now left for him save to finish his wretched course with his own hand, or to find death in the first danger that offered a remedy.

Redwald listened to his young master's account with a face that was steadier than either the mind or the heart within him; but he answered promptly—

"'Truly, Master Cuthbert, 'tis ill straightening a bent stick by breaking it. This is not a pretty business, and it need never have happened—mass, had I been here, it should not; but, after all, thou frettest thyself too finely over it. 'Tis a bad accident, I deny not, but it *is* an accident; and thou wilt not mend it by killing thyself, nor by flinging thy happiness after it, neither. Thy young lady must not hear of it—that's certain; for, if she doth, I doubt she may look with strained eyes on

thee, though likely she will love thee in her heart always. Faith, Master Cuthbert, why should your two lives be spoiled for a cursed cross of an accident which no man meant, and none but the Devil guessed the falling of? I advise thee to do now what thou oughtest to have done before—leave thine enemies a cool lair to look for thee in. But be sure thou lettest no hint of the matter to thy young lady. Thou canst tell thine own tale in thine own time; and—I warrant, Master Cuthbert, we will save thee yet, or the Fiend is in this business!"

Bernard, in spite of his despondency, took a little heart at his follower's bold words, and it was agreed between them, and later on by Rosamond also, to put the old soldier's plan into practice without more delay. The next evening, therefore, as soon as darkness had fallen, the two allies set forth to procure horses, and to make what other arrangements were needed for the coming flight; Bernard, who could ill endure his own thoughts, having insisted on attending Redwald, albeit much against the latter's counsel, as well as the pleading fears of Rosamond, who was thus for a second time left alone in the little cottage, or with only the hound Rollo for guard and company.

Both Redwald's doubts and Rosamond's fears were indeed fated to meet with a speedier warrant than either of the pair had looked for; for hardly had Bernard and his follower vanished up the winding hill-track than a knock came suddenly at the door, and the fierce growl with which Rollo sprang to answer it gave warning that a stranger, and not a friend, demanded entrance. Quieting the dog and her own heart, Rosamond advanced to the door, and, without opening it, enquired who

the visitor might be and what his business; but the next moment she freely drew the bolts, and ordered Rollo back in an assured tone, for the reply she had received, although in a voice unknown to her, had been such as to quickly banish her alarm and even to bring her joy.

"I come from thy father, Sir Edmund Dunstan," the voice said, "and I bear a message from him which I have promised to deliver to thee."

For answer Rosamond threw open the door without more delay, and was surprised to see the figure of a woman clad in deep mourning, whom she had never before spoken to, but withal had a dim sense of having encountered somewhere and on some occasion not very distant. On her side, Mistress Edith silently followed her hostess into the little room whither Rosamond led her; and then, turning to the girl with a grave smile, she said quietly—

"I pray thee, fair mistress, to pardon this scant ceremony in one thou knowest not, and who knoweth not thee; though I have seen thee often enough in former years to make thee seem to me like an old acquaintance. But thou must e'en excuse the manner in the need, for I had no choice save to come to thee in this fashion and at this hour."

"There is no excuse needed," replied Rosamond eagerly. "Thou sayest that thou hast a message for me from my father. If so, I entreat thee to tell it me without dallying. Is he well, I pray thee? And hath he forgiven me? Hath he indeed sent thee to tell me that my fault is pardoned?"

Mistress Edith in her debate with Father Hubert had claimed to have other thoughts than those of wrath and

vengeance, and certainly at this moment she gazed at the appealing girl with a gentler look than the monk had ever seen in her, or most likely believed her capable of.

"I must warn thee," she said in a low voice and with a glance of pity, "that I bring no glad tidings to thee, and I would fain prepare thee, if it be possible, for what will need thy best courage to bear patiently."

Rosamond met her companion's gaze with the scared look of an animal that knows not whence its threatened wound will come, as she gasped in faltering tones—

"What hath happened—I pray thee tell me plainly? I thought thou hadst brought a message from my father. Didst thou not just say so? If thou hast aught to tell me, have the grace to tell it me quickly. I have courage enough to face sorrow, but not to tarry for it."

"I was wrong," returned Mistress Edith after a moment's hesitation, "to tell thee that I brought a message from thy father. Truly, I bring thee a summons which is as good as sent by him, since methinks he would have sent it to thee had he been able; but—I grieve to say it to thee—he is not able, and——"

With a loud cry Rosamond interrupted her visitor, and, grasping the latter's arm tightly, exclaimed—

"He is ill, then, is he not? No—I see it in thy looks—he is lost to me, he is dead! Killed by my fault, by my folly—God forgive me for having fled from him, for having flouted him, for having been a false daughter to him—he the best and kindest of fathers, and I, truly, the worst, the most cruel, the most ungrateful of thankless children to him! Would to Heaven

that I had never left yonder Convent across the seas to bring sorrow to his grey head, to vex his aged heart with my wicked scorn of him!"

Rosamond paused a while in her passionate outburst, and then between her sobs, and with her hands pressed tightly over her face, added more quietly—

"But indeed I knew not that he cared so much for me, I had not thought that he would grieve so greatly at my leaving him. Verily, I had not seen him since I was a child, and he seemed cold to me, and my mother was lost to us, or I wot it would not have happened, and——God forgive me, I have killed him! I have murdered him!" broke out the girl in a fresh agony and with a fuller sweep of memory—"my own father, and I his daughter, who owed him all things, and basely forsook him for my selfish pleasures!"

"Thou hast not killed him—he was not slain by thee, nor by any act of thine," said Mistress Edith, divided between pity for the remorseful grief before her and wrath at the absent cause of both her own and Rosamond's trouble. "I tell thee, thou art innocent of this misfortune: he did not die because thou fleddest from him, and I pray thee do not vex thy sorrow by needless blaming of thyself. I wot well thy burden is heavy enough without adding to it."

Rosamond sprang from the chair on which she had sunk in her trembling excitement, and said quickly—

"Tell me what thou meanest by these words of thine? Thou sayest that he was not *slain* by me. By our Lady, dost thou mean to tell me that a man liveth who hath been villain enough to raise his hand against one of my father's years—one

so worthy, so respected both by the King and the common people—one that never did wrong or spite to mortal creature, whether high or humble—dost thou mean to say that such a villain liveth, and hath slain my father?"

"Such a villain indeed liveth," answered Mistress Edith in a voice almost as excited as her companion's, "and he *hath* dared to lift his impious hand against the life thou speakest of. I tell thee such a villain slew thy father last night—slew him coldly and cruelly—in his own house, and with his own weapon—and then fled from him like a coward to spend the treasure he had basely robbed him of!"

Rosamond turned deadly pale at these words, and staggered as if about to fall; but, gathering herself with a great effort, she exclaimed with passionate energy—

"Tell me the name of this villain who hath done this thing to him? I pray thee, I demand of thee—it is my right, my heritage—who is this villain thou sayest hath robbed my father, and then murdered him?"

Something in Rosamond's tone or words seemed to offend her visitor, for, dropping the previous kindness of her manner, the latter replied with sudden sternness—

"Thou knowest it well enough, and him also. By the mass, methinks the name of Cuthbert Alderic will stink in thy remembrance long after thou hast torn his vile image from that weak heart of thine, and thrown it to thy father's corpse which crieth for vengeance to thee!"

Mistress Edith, however, had no sooner delivered this thrust than she repented it, pity for the gaping wound she had caused quickly taking the place of the impulsive lady's anger.

The blow, indeed, seemed to have struck the unhappy victim with such force as to deprive her of the sense of feeling it, and Rosamond only stared at her assailant with fixed eyes and parted lips, until her companion feared that she had gone mad. Presently, and just as Mistress Edith, scared at her own work, was about to spring to the girl's help—to implore her pardon, to deny, even, the words which had caused the mischief—the tide turned, and Rosamond changed as suddenly as the stifled heaven when it flames forth into fervid lightning. Flinging from her arm the hand which her visitor had laid on it, and facing the latter with flashing eyes and a mien as resolute as her own, she said fiercely—

"Who art thou, and what seekest thou, that thou comest here to blast a fair name and a noble life with thy wicked lies and false accusings? Verily, I *have* a weak heart, and I *do* love Cuthbert Alderic; and I believe not a word of all thou hast said to me, for I wot well he would not have raised his least finger against my father—nay, he would have freely given his life and every drop of his body's blood for him! By our Lady, I remember thee now! Thou art she that wept over the slain knight at the King's tournament; and truly, I wept, too, to see thy sorrow for him; but I knew not thou wouldst turn thy tears into wicked gall, and thy sighs into poisonous whispers, to spoil the joy of others because thine own had been taken from thee!"

Mistress Edith did not suffer herself to be stirred by this speech—she seemed rather to gain calmness by the passionate outburst of her companion.

"Is not the trouble enough," she said quietly, "without

our striving over it like two dogs over a tossed bone? Surely we are sisters in sorrow; and if thou couldst weep for my woes, I also can weep for thine. I deny not that I desired vengeance on the man who slew my Knight—is it wonderful that a woman should hate the hand that took from her the only staff she had to lean on, the only life she had left to love? But my vengeance hideth not the present wickedness, it hindereth not that the same hand which widowed me hath now made an orphan of thee. I tell thee—though I pity the pain it causeth thee—that Cuthbert Alderic, and Cuthbert Alderic only, was the man that did this thing, that he alone is guilty of thy father's death; and if thou doubtest me, there is yet another witness, one I think thou wilt believe better, who will prove the bloody truth of what I say to thee."

"And I tell *thee*," returned Rosamond with a desperate look which long afterwards haunted her companion, "that I believe it not—no, nor would believe it if an angel came from Heaven to be thy witness to it—not, even, if Cuthbert Alderic himself became thy warrant for it! He, that is as gentle as he is strong, that never lifted his hand save to defend the weak and helpless, or to punish the vile and traitorous—to accuse him of shedding the blood of an old man, and one, too, that he looked on as his own father—by our Lady, I will believe it when God avoucheth it! I tell thee, woman," she added with a wild glance at her lover's accuser—half appeal, half defiance—"if thou hadst truly these proofs thou boastest of, if thou couldst indeed persuade my eyes of this thing thou pointest to—I would pray thy mercy first to thrust a dagger into my heart, that so my love might not live longer than my

faith—that I might die believing in the man I have loved and trusted!"

Mistress Edith's mercy was certainly moved at this moment by the sight of the suffering she had occasioned; so much so, indeed, that the pregnant resolve again seized her of denying the truth of the bloody charge she had taken such pains to prove, and, after inventing some plausible shift for her past conduct—as, for instance, her own revengeful malice—to leave the lovers to what little chance of happiness yet remained to them; but at the very instant of this gracious impulse it was so contrived by the Devil, or by the Devil's officious agent Accident, that her eyes should suddenly fall upon the suspended sword which Bernard had wielded at the King's tournament, and which, in the jealous fury the sight caused her, she doubted not was the same weapon that had slain her Knight. Turning, therefore, to her unhappy victim, with a stern frown on her face instead of the smile of mercy which had briefly rested there, she said coldly—

"Thou art the best judge of thine own heart and thine own duty, and whether thy dead father or thy living lover be most dear to thee. For my own part, I have now played it, and I will no more trouble thee. I have told thee what hath befallen thy father, and the manner of the falling. If thou regardest it as but a little cloud between thy lover and thee, it is not for me to make a great storm of it. If thou canst sleep contented in the arms that have reft thy father from thee—by the mass, it concerneth not me to mind or meddle with it!"

"Thou counsellest me lightly to leave the man I love, the husband I have given my heart and plighted my faith to,"

answered Rosamond with an indignant flush. "I pray thee, hast thou ever loved? Wouldst thou have fled so easily from him thou lovedst and hadst pledged thy troth to, at the first whisper of a stranger and an enemy?"

"I would not dwell with the man that had slain my father," rejoined Mistress Edith sternly. "I would not lie in the arms that had stifled the precious breath, or suffer the hands to touch me that were red with the sacred blood, of him that had given life to me! I tell thee——"

"Tell me no more—hast thou no grace in thee?—by Heaven, thou hast tortured me enough for one hour!" exclaimed Rosamond wildly. "I tell thee that I, too, love not my father less—he is not less precious, he is not less sacred to me, than thou speakest of; and I, also, would not dwell with the man who had raised his impious hand against the life that had given me life—no, not if my heart broke in the severing! Verily, thou hast said too much not to say more, and I will no longer refuse these proofs thou boastest of. Thou didst speak of another witness—one that could swear to this bloody charge of thine. I believe it not, but I pray thee fetch him here; and God shall judge between our souls if it be not blasphemy!"

Mistress Edith gave a smile of triumph as, without further word, she stepped quickly to the door of the cottage, and, opening it, called in a low voice to someone who was evidently awaiting her. Rosamond shuddered as she heard the answering whisper and the advancing step, both of which she thought that she recognised; and the next instant her stern visitor returned to the room, followed by her father's old servant,

Oswald. The moment the latter entered, the excited girl sprang eagerly towards him, and, grasping his arm tightly, cried to him—

"Tell me, Oswald—thou, at least, art a friend, and thou knowest why I left my father's house, and how I loved him; and thou knowest, also, how I love *him*—him that I fled with, the husband I have given my heart and sworn my faith to—or rather, thou knowest not, nor canst ever know, how I love him—but——"

Rosamond, choked by her emotion—her heart tossed and torn between past joy and present grief—paused a while, and then went on in passionate tones—

"I pray thee, Oswald—I entreat thee—for the sake of our Lady and my dead mother—if thou hast any love, any pity for me—if thou wouldst not break this poor heart of mine—nay, it is almost broken already—tell me truly that this woman hath spoken lies to me, that the man I love and honour hath not done this thing she chargeth him with, that the hand—O God, the hand I have so often kissed and fondled!—is not stained with the sacred blood of my own father!"

The old soldier bent his head low over the hand that desperately clutched him, and his tears fell fast on it, as he answered in a broken voice—

"Alas! my dear young mistress, that thy pretty eyes should ever come to weep, and thy tender heart to ache! Would to God thou hadst never left thy father's house, or thine own sweet nest yonder! Alack, thou didst take all our joy with thee, and—worse the woe!—didst leave all thine own behind thee!"

"Do not pity me," said Rosamond impatiently. "If thou hast any grace for me, tell me that this thing is false, that this woman hath told me lies, that the man I love and honour is not guilty of this horrible sacrilege!——I pray thee, Oswald," she broke off suddenly, with a wild look of appeal to the old man, and clinging to him like the child he so well remembered and still delighted to think of—"it is not true—is it, Oswald?—that Cuthbert Alderic, the man I love, my own husband, hath done the deed which this false woman accuseth him of? I pray thee—only tell me that it is false, Oswald, and by our Lady—by our gracious Saviour in Heaven—I will live for thee, I will die for thee—I will pray to God with my last breath to bless and guerdon thee!"

"And I would die, too—I, also, would give my soul and body, my dear young mistress," returned Oswald, beside himself with grief and pity, "could I but answer thee as thou desirest me! Mass, dost thou think that I would keep thee waiting in thy sorrow if I could pluck thee from it? that I would not give thee smiles, were there a beam in all the sky to steal for thee, to chase the tears from those sweet eyes of thine?—I, that carried thee in my arms when thou wast no higher than my two hands here—I, that love thee better than I love anything—yea, almost well enough to wish thee lying by thy dead father yonder—yea, truly, for methinks both our hearts would be the less troubled for thee!"

"It is true, then," said Rosamond in a husky voice—"thou, also, art an enemy—thou believest in this bloody charge—thou, too, deemest my husband guilty of my father's murder?"

"I would gladly lie to thee," replied the old soldier sadly, "but thou wouldst not thank me for hiding the truth from thee; and to-morrow it would be told thee by other lips, perchance by rougher ones."

"No, I should not thank thee—I would hear the truth, as thou callest it," said Rosamond with desperate firmness: "if my heart breaketh, I will hear this thing from thee. Tell me—what is this truth thou hast come to witness to?"

"It is true," answered Oswald in the same mournful tone, "that this Master Alderic slew thy father last night, in his own room, and with his own weapon. I would to God it were false, and that I could deny it!"

"And it was thou that sentest him to my father," said Rosamond, with a look of bitter reproach which struck the old man hardly. "I pray thee, was that a good service either to me or the master thou professest so much love for?"

"I did but as I was bid," replied Oswald in a low voice. "Thy father told me to fetch him, and thou knowest that I could not disobey his command to me."

Rosamond covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the horrible shapes that were being conjured. Presently, lifting her head, and again appealing to the old man, she said more gently—

"Tell me, Oswald—and forgive me if I spoke harshly to thee—mayst thou not be mistaken—at least, may not this horrible thing have been an accident? The blow is heavy enough in any hap, God wotteth; but—I pray thee give me this comfort, Oswald—I pray thee say that thou thinkest it

was mischance—not a villainy—God and our Lady have mercy on me!—planned and purposed!"

Oswald shook his head sorrowfully, as he made answer—

"Would to God I thought so and could say it to thee, my dear young mistress—but I cannot. Truly, on our way yonder, I warned Master Alderic not to raise his hand against thy father, and he swore solemnly that he would not; but after they had been a little while together I was roused by the clash of weapons, and presently a cry followed—mass, I shall not forget it waking or sleeping!—and when I opened the door to see what had happed to them, my poor master was lying on his back, with a sword-thrust here in his breast big enough to let all the blood from him, and—by the Rood, my dear young mistress, I need tell thee no more of it!"

It is the same with the heart of man as with the breast of ocean: often, when a mighty storm has stirred the passions of the one or the other, a strange lull follows which looks to be the very Spirit of Calm returned to its smiling throne, but is only a cunning semblance of it—the Demon of the Tempest is still there, the tumult is yet raging, but deeper down, out of sight; and the surf on the distant rocks, almost beyond our ken, alone gives a hint of that potent "after-swell" which is scarce less violent than the storm itself. Rosamond received the confirmation of her fears, the death-stroke to her hopes, with a composure that surprised and somewhat startled her two companions: the wild hurricane that had swept over her was followed by a calm which was but the mocking mask of the storm; which but covered, as with a false smile, the fair vessels that lay wrecked deep under it. For a long while—so

long, indeed, that those who looked on her began to fear for her reason—the girl stood speechless and motionless, with eyes fixed upon the old servant, but with no more regard in their stare than belongs to one that sleeps. Oswald full of horror, and Mistress Edith touched with remorseful pity, were about to move to her help, to implore her to awake from her terrible trance, when of a sudden Rosamond roused herself, and, stepping quickly up to Oswald, said in a low, harsh whisper—

"I pray thee take me to my father's dead body—now, at once, I command thee—it may be that God will show me His purpose there."

The old man was cut to the heart by the strange sound of his young mistress' voice, the like of which he had never heard, and which scared him more than the fiercest battle-cry he had ever hearkened to. Too late, he now wished that he had heeded Father Hubert's counsel of leaving the evil to mend itself, and regretted his haste in sending that very day to stir the King's wrath with the news of this dark tragedy. Even as it was, in this late hour of the doomful respite, his heart faltered and his mind doubted, and he turned from his pitying gaze on Rosamond to give an imploring glance to Mistress Edith; but that lady only replied by firmly pointing to the door, a gesture which sadly confirmed Oswald's own conclusion —that the Earth had now no remedy in it, and that to Heaven alone must be left the healing.

With bowed head and trembling steps, therefore, the old man slowly led Rosamond from the little room which had been the cradle, and was now the tomb, of the short-lived joy

that had been born to her. Close behind her, at as slow a pace and as solemn, also went forth that other victim of sin and sister in sorrow who had so long followed and hung over her like a shadow; and who would yet follow her some way further—as far as, and perchance beyond, the gate that stands between the two worlds which divide man's destiny.

When Rosamond reached the home she had so lately fled from, she abruptly parted from her fellow-travellers, and, passing quickly up the stairs, entered the room wherein all that was left of her father was resting. Here, we are briefly told, she remained through the long watches of that dark night, nor until the first streak of dawn, unnoticed by her, had touched the dull face of the wintry sky, left her lonely vigil, and joined again her anxious companions. When she at length did so, Mistress Edith was relieved to note her firm step and the look of resolved calm on her face; but the old soldier sighed heavily at the sight of her, for it was not the same Rosamond that he and Bernard had known, nor, he thought, ever more would be while the bruised heart beat in her.

There is a sovereignty in a great grief which sets a guard upon the lightest tongues, and neither of Rosamond's companions was minded to break the silence that hedged her round. Presently, however, this was broken by the girl herself saying to Oswald, as she pointed in a certain direction of the forest—

"I am going to yonder Convent and my father's sister. I pray thee have the horses got ready for us, and delay not any longer than thou hast need for."

The old soldier seemed about to make some answer, and his lips moved nervously; but in the end he said nothing, merely setting off to carry out the command which his young mistress had given him. When he had gone, Mistress Edith turned to Rosamond, and said earnestly—

"I pray thee tell me—art thou now going to hide thy sorrows in yonder Convent?"

Rosamond bowed her head in reply, but without speaking; and Mistress Edith added—

"I entreat thee, then, to let me go with thee and share thy sojourn there. Truly, it seemeth fitting that we go together, for we have both suffered from the same cause. Like thee, I have tasted of joy—like thee, I have had my fill of sorrow; and like thee, I have no more appetite for the world which serveth me."

Rosamond again bowed her head as her only answer; and Mistress Edith, forbearing to press her further, accepted this as a token of assent. A few hours later, indeed, the two companions in affliction might have been seen entering together the gates of a neighbouring Convent—brought there by one of the strangest turns ever contrived by the wheel of Destiny.

Beyond the walls, with bare head bent lowly, and streaming eyes, the old man stood watching them until the last fold of their dresses—or rather, of one dress only—had vanished from his wistful gaze; and then he, too, turned slowly away, and set his face homeward, like a symbol of the sorrow they were leaving behind them.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN CROSIER AND CROWN

WHETHER ordered by Destiny or Accident, it so happened that those august personages mentioned in an earlier division of this history were again gathered together in the Forest at the very time of the events we are now recording. The King, indeed, loved sport almost as well as the royal Normans that hunted before him; and his whilom close friend and still professed intimate, Becket, had borne him company—partly to take a hand in a pastime in which, whether for skill or zeal, he had once ridden second to none, and partly to hold conference with the neighbouring prelates on the serious questions at present affecting Church and State.

In addition to the above fortuity, it was further ordered by one or other of the same occult agents that on the day after Sir Edmund's tragical death the King should despatch a messenger to invite the old Knight to a hunting-party. Moreover, by an officious devilry of design which was somewhat superfluous, this messenger (who was no other than the famous Sir Reginald Fitzurse) happened to arrive at the little castle at the very moment when Father Hubert was turning his back on it, and consequently he found the old soldier, Oswald, in the promptest of moods—hot from Hell, as it might be said—to give him an answer which should stir the King's anger. Now Sir Reginald Fitzurse was a thoughtful man, albeit a fierce one; and while listening to

the old servant's piteous tale, and assuring him of the King's justice, he bethought him of the good turn which this misadventure might take in furthering his royal master's plans. Bidding Oswald, therefore, not doubt of the retribution he prayed for, and cautioning him to keep the matter to himself until he heard from the Knight again, Fitzurse took his departure, and lost no time in communicating to the King the tragical news of his murdered Marshal.

Henry of Anjou, by all accounts of him, possessed a mingling of prudence and passion which together played a curious part in his own and his country's history. On the present occasion, when he first learned of the bloody death of his old friend and servant, he broke into a storm of fury, and was for at once sending to seize and punish the author of the foul deed; but in a while, after Fitzurse had found a gap into which to thrust a pointed hint or two, he became calmer, and quickly caught the drift of the latter's counsel.

"By our crown, thou art right!" he exclaimed with an approving nod. "As well hang this knave on a tree of his Grace's growing! The boil hath now got to a ripe head, and methinks this pricking will let the humour from it! Bring the old man hither to-morrow, Reginald, and we will have a fair company to give him countenance. We have lost a good servant; but, we promise thee, he shall not have shed his blood to no purpose!"

On the morrow, then, in the great courtyard of the same castle already mentioned as the King's residence when visiting the Forest, a goodly number of notable persons, both temporal and spiritual, were assembled; including the worthy Prior

of St. Giles, who much marvelled at, and a little misdoubted, the royal summons of so unassuming a Churchman as himself.

This assemblage had ostensibly gathered for no more serious business than a great hunt; but beyond that, the King had hinted to some of his spiritual guests his desire to consult with them by the way on certain matters affecting the government of his Forest, and the welfare of the people dwelling in it—a sufficient apology for what in those days hardly needed any.

An apology, however, was needed—if apologies are ever needed by monarchs—on another score: the day was a gay one, and the company as gay as the day; horses chafing, and dogs baying, with plumed knights and bright-scarfed ladies as impatient as either for the promised sport, but yet no sign from the King to set forward. On his side, had they known it, the royal host was no less impatient than his guests; for he also waited for a sign, and fretted uneasily at a different delay—to wit, the long coming of Fitzurse and the old man he was so anxiously expecting. At length, to gain time and to ease his own spirits, he rode up to the assembled company, and said with a smile—

"We crave your pardon, gentle friends, for keeping you so long waiting; but an honoured guest hath yet to join us, without whose presence we like not to begin our pleasure. By the mass, good Sir Edmund is not wont to trip it so leisurely!"

At this moment Fortune, which loves to call uninvited, came to the King's help in a way he had little reckoned on; for hearing a stir of tongues near the great gateway, and turning round to see the cause of it, he was surprised to

observe Sir Wilfrid Alderic advancing cap in hand towards him, and with an air of assurance that matched well with his presence there. In his wrath at this unlooked-for visit, the King almost forgot the anxiety that had been troubling him, as he said sternly—

"Who hath bidden thee to be our guest to-day, Sir Wilfrid Alderic? Art thou so ill-read in courtly manners as not to know that it befits offending subjects to wait till the King's pleasure sendeth for them?"

For reply Sir Wilfrid bent his knee to the King, and said humbly, yet firmly—

"I know, my liege, that the King's ears are ever open to the prayers of his subjects, and that his heart is ever ready to do them justice. Truly, it befits those banished from your Grace's presence—and I wot no worse can befall them—to wait till it pleaseth your Grace to smile on them: nevertheless, I would now plead some favour with your Grace, seeing that I was ill at the time this charge was brought against me, and so unable to say aught in my own defence—since when, my gracious liege, matters have arisen which put me in the place that mine enemies formerly stood in; and I am here to-day to make a charge, if your Grace will give me the freedom, as well as to answer one."

The King hesitated a moment, and then, motioning Sir Wilfrid to rise, he said in a cold tone—

"And what is this charge of thine, Sir Knight, and thy defence likewise? That cometh the first, and we will hear it first. Thou doubtless knowest that thine own father's friend, Sir Edmund Dunstan, was thy chief accuser?"

"Sir Edmund will be the first to speak to your Grace for me," replied Sir Wilfrid eagerly—"nay, my liege, he hath already promised to do so; and my best defence, if your Grace will give me leave to say it, is that he hath willingly bestowed his fair daughter on me—the very maiden I was accused of doing this wrong to."

The King, and not the King only, started with astonishment at these words, and it was in a more gracious voice that the offended monarch answered—

"By our crown, if Sir Edmund hath forgiven thee, we see not why we should be less merciful. But this is strange news, Sir Knight. We had not heard that the maiden was Sir Edmund's daughter; and, if thine offence weighed so lightly, why didst thou not sooner come to be shriven of it?"

"My offence was not a light one," returned Sir Wilfrid modestly. "I own, my liege, that I followed the strange damsel, as I then took her for, when she fled from me; but I swear to your Grace that I meant no harm to her"—here the Knight gave a fierce look at some of his former companions whom he observed smiling at him—"and Sir Edmund was kind enough to accept my excuses, and also to grant me the great favour my heart craved of him. For my reason in not coming to your Grace sooner," added Sir Wilfrid with an air of reluctant candour, "I was bound by a promise to the worthy Prior of St. Giles yonder, alike for the sake of the Church and my own family, to keep the matter a secret; nor should I even now have troubled your Grace, had the bargain been kept as faithfully on his side as it hath on mine."

All eyes were turned on the unfortunate Prior, who, however,

bore the gaze steadily, and the next moment the Primate came to his relief by taking him aside and engaging in earnest discourse with him. On his part, the King was not slow in divining the kernel that lay in the present nut, but for the nonce he contented himself with the outside of the shell, merely saying—

"Thou art wedded, then, to this fair prize of thine, Sir Knight? By the mass, we envy thee thy good fortune, for by all accounts thou hast got a jewel that is worth the setting."

"By the mass—no, I am not wedded to her, my liege!" exclaimed Sir Wilfrid in a tone of suppressed fury. "She hath been stolen from both me and her father by the same pious champion who broke my head—the Devil knoweth how!—when I first met with her, and who afterwards slew your Grace's faithful follower and my friend, the good Knight Sir Eustace Devereux!"

A buzz of surprise greeted Sir Wilfrid as he made this statement; and the King, after dismounting from his horse and handing it to one of his grooms, said gravely—

"Thy story groweth in wonder, Sir Knight. We thought that the man which struck thee was a monk, and the strange challenger who slew Sir Eustace was as stout a knight as any in our service. Dost thou mean to tell us that these are indeed one, and that this same monk and jouster hath now robbed thee of thy promised bride?"

"He hath indeed done so, my liege—I swear it by all that's holy!" said Sir Wilfrid quickly; "and he is even now keeping her hid from us in a house not half a league from his own

Priory. Your Grace hath but to send there to prove the truth of what I avouch."

"It shall be seen to, man—never fear it!" returned the King in a stern voice. "Such things shall not be lightly done in our realm, nor by our subjects, be they monks or other!" Then, turning to the Primate, who with the Prior had drawn near to him, he added loudly—"What thinkest thou now of this sheep of thine, my lord Archbishop? We congratulate your Grace on possessing so valiant a servant; but methinks 'tis enough to slay our knights, without stealing their wives and daughters from them!"

Becket's proud face flushed for a moment, but he only replied to the King's taunt—

"There is scarce any flock without a strayed sheep, my liege, and our fold is a very great one. If the proofs be equal to the charge, I defend not this wickedness; and, to use your Grace's own words, we shall not suffer any servant of ours to treat lightly God's commands or our authority."

"By our crown, we knew not that ye had any authority!" exclaimed the King angrily. "Your Grace is pleased to drive an old nail into the present wall, but we have as good pincers to draw it out again; and we tell thee, my lord Archbishop, that we mean not to suffer loose monks, any more than other men, to play foul tricks on our peaceful subjects, and then to hide behind your Grace's skirts to escape a whipping!"

"I pray your Grace to pardon me for saying that the nail is no whit rusted," answered Becket quietly, "and that what we claim is no more than our just right and due heritage. Surely, my liege, it seemeth fitting that a father should

punish his own sons, else were there little discipline in the family."

"Your Grace's argument hath a hole in it through which our own easily creepeth," rejoined the King with a slight laugh. "Of a truth, if thou keepest thy trippings and trouncings to thine own family, 'tis all we ask of thee; but if thy sons play the wanton beyond thy doors, they must look beyond thy doors for their whipping also. We mean not to have two laws for monks and men—no, nor two masters in one kingdom!"

Becket was about to reply, when the dispute was put an end to, or rather briefly interrupted to be soon more bitterly resumed, by the entrance of the two personages whom the King had been so eagerly awaiting. The latter exchanged a meaning smile with Sir Reginald as he saw his best argument approaching, and said pleasantly to the Primate—

"By the Rood, your Grace will now have the proofs thou desirest, for here cometh Sir Edmund's old servant, and doubtless his master is not far behind him. Speak, Reginald," he added to Fitzurse, who had now led forward the old soldier: "what news hast thou brought us of worthy Sir Edmund, and why hath he been so long in joining us?"

"Worthy Sir Edmund will never join your Grace more," returned Fitzurse in a melancholy tone, "for he lieth dead in yonder house of his—foully murdered, my liege, by the bloodiest treason man or devil was ever guilty of!"

This news again struck the company with surprise, and filled the more thoughtful with dismay; but three persons were especially affected by it. Becket, though he had no certain

knowledge of the mischance, instinctively divined that a dark cloud had fallen upon him and the Church whose battle he was now fighting—perhaps, even, felt the shiver of the darker shadow which was to follow it; the Prior, knowing more and fearing more, was in the case of one who having fancied that the worst had spent itself, suddenly finds that worst to be as nothing to what has come after it; while Sir Wilfrid, the most astounded of any, for once had his soul stirred with pity and horror, and sincerely regretted, and even desired to avenge, the death of the man who had so nearly been his father-in-law. The King himself was the coolest of the whole company, for he resembled a man who attends a banquet having already supped, but who is obliged to assume an appetite. The comparison, however, is false in one respect—his Grace had unfeignedly valued the dead Knight, and he as unfeignedly deplored his loss; and his anger was not mere acting when he turned to the old soldier, and said in a voice that rang with emotion—

"Speak to us, my worthy fellow. Thou wert ever a faithful servant of the Knight thy master, and before that (God be gracious to her!) a trusty soldier in the army of our late mother, and we wot well thou wilt say no more than the fair truth. Tell us, then, if this bloody tale be indeed true?—Hath thy master been thus robbed of his daughter, and of his life also?"

Before this calamity had come to him Oswald would have flushed to his grey hairs at the King's mention of his service under the late Empress; but now it scarce touched him, his heart beat no more to the world's praise or blame, and since

yesterday even revenge had sickened in him—the old soldier was only weary of the whole mad stir, and would have thanked that man best who would have laid him down to sleep by the master he had so dearly loved and so cruelly lost. At this same hour the day before he would have come here with blazing eyes and raging heart, to tell his story and demand vengeance in the wildest words his tongue could utter—now, he only desired to hold his peace, to meddle no more with either the dead or living, to leave the evil and its mending to itself and God. Nevertheless, as that might not be, and speak he must, the old man resolved to say as little as occasion would let him; forgetting, in his new dread of swelling the mischief, that an unwilling witness most damns the cause he seeks to shield, and that a swearing foe is sometimes less to be feared than a silent friend. Oswald, however, had no cause left either to speak or be silent for—his master dead, his young mistress past helping, and Bernard yielded up to God's judgment. For a long while the old soldier hung doubtfully on his answer, with his head bowed upon his breast; and the King, deeming that his grief mastered him, also waited for him in patient silence. At last, in a low voice, and with an uncertain air, he said slowly—

"It is true, my lord, that my master is dead, and that his daughter was stolen from him—that is, my lord, she fled from him, and——"

Here Oswald again paused, and the King, looking with some surprise at him, said in return—

"We pray thee tell us—was it the same hand that did both, that killed thy master and stole his daughter from him?"

The old man mused a moment: then, seeing no way to escape the question, replied sorrowfully—

"It was, my lord—alack, that it should fall so, and that I should have to tell it! Truly, the same man who loved his daughter, and whom she loved also, killed the Knight my master—how, the Devil only knoweth that made the mischief!"

"Thou speakest somewhat doubtfully," said the King, regarding the old soldier with a less kindly look. "By the Rood, we thought thou didst love thy master like a true fellow, but thou seemest rather to pity his enemy than to desire vengeance for the wrong that enemy hath wrought him."

Oswald roused at this speech as though he had been struck, and, alike forgetful of the royal presence and his own prescribed caution, exclaimed passionately—

"I would have died for him, my lord—I would have died for him in any way and at any hour—but of what use is vengeance to him now, or to me either? If it would fetch him back to life again, God wotteth he should have his fill of it, and brimming over! Mass, when that villain struck the life from him, and I found him lying choked in his own gore, with his own sword driven through the brave old heart of him—did I not swear to God to avenge every drop of his spilled blood, and every hair of his white head? Mass, ay, and what came of it? Truly, my lord, I did but break the heart of my young mistress that I carried in my arms when she was a baby, and whose dead mother bade me to watch over her after the Lord had parted them! And what good was it to my poor master, when I had done it? I wot none, my lord, I wot none, and

that I only played the Devil's game for him! And that, my lord, was why I wished to speak no more of it, and to have no more hand in the bloody stirring of it."

Few hearts, even the sternest, of those present that were not moved by the old man's speech, and Becket seized the occasion to say to the King—

"Methinks that your Grace, and I, and all here, may take a lesson from this old man's words, for he speaketh both wisely and as a Christian; and it would become us all to think less of vengeance, ay, and of justice also, and more of mercy and gentle charity. Verily, my liege, the King of Kings Himself hath shown us the blessing of the one, and even Earthly kings have found profit in the other."

"We accept your Grace's homily with becoming humility," answered the King coldly, "but we would remind your Grace, in our turn, that the sword of justice hath ever been wielded by the King of Kings, and that we Earthly ones, as thou callest us, are deputed to wield it also. Mercy, we deny not, is a comely sheath; but, wanting the blade of Justice, it would be no more than a face without a body, an empty scorn to the eyes that looked on it." Then, turning again to Oswald, he said in a kinder tone—"Thou art a worthy fellow, and we respect thy motive which prompteth thee to keep silence; but thou must bear in mind, as we now said to his Grace of Canterbury, that we have to minister justice as well as mercy, and that we owe a duty to our liege subjects who look to us for right and judgment. Moreover, thou must remember that thou also hast a duty, which thou owest to us and to every man in this aggrieved realm; and we therefore command thee to

put aside thy present doubts, and to tell us plainly who this villain is that hath thus robbed thee of a gracious master, and us of a friend and servant we loved and honoured."

Whether or no the royal reasoning moved Oswald, the human sympathy did so. Indeed, the last words of the King's speech seemed to have quickened again all the old soldier's feelings of wrath which the later sorrow had numbed in passing; so much so, that he replied in a tone and manner which might have a little tempered the Primate's good opinion of him—

"It was a cursed monk of yonder Priory, my lord—ay, and a son of my poor master's old friend, Sir Wilfrid Alderic! Cuthbert Alderic is his right name, my lord, though I wot he is called by another in the place that owneth him."

A mighty hush, like a lull between storms, followed this announcement, during which each man looked at his fellow, but scarce a whisper stirred the silence. The pause was at length broken by Sir Wilfrid stepping forwards to the King, and saying in a loud voice—

"I trust your Grace deemeth not that I had any part in this infamy—no, nor any knowledge of it. As God judgeth me, I swear that I knew no more than your Grace, or any man here present, of the Knight's death, let alone the foul manner of its compassing!"

"No man dreameth of accusing thee, Sir Knight," returned the King gently—"nay, rather thou art deserving of much pity, alike for thyself and the honoured name thou bearest; for we presume that this unhappy wretch is thine own brother, and the same thief, too, thou didst charge with stealing thy bride from thee?"

"I shame to own, my liege," answered Sir Wilfrid, "that he is indeed my brother—at least, my half-brother; but we had not met since we were children until the day he came across me in yonder forest; and I would to God, monk and brother though he be, that I had then punished him as his insolence deserved, for he hath since robbed me, as your Grace says, of both my bride and my good name, and also of the two best friends Heaven had given me!"

At this point the Prior, who had followed the speakers with varied emotions, in the end indignation succeeding grief and horror, drew near, and, bending his head to the King, said in a firm tone—

"May it please your Grace to hear a word from me concerning this monk, who is of mine own House; and the accusation against him, whereon I may be able to throw some light?"

The King frowned somewhat sternly as he replied—

"We cannot give thee joy on the discipline of thy House, Reverend Father; and as for the *accusation*, as thou termest it, that needeth little light on it. Art thou not content with this old man's witness? Dost thou doubt the bloody truth of this monk of thine?"

"I doubt not, my liege," said the Prior sadly, "that by some mischance, which only God and himself wot of, he hath done this thing which the old man telleth us of; but I cannot believe that he did it of his own free purpose, that he willingly shed the blood of one he was bound by every law to respect and hold sacred. Truly, my liege, he was too noble, and it was against his interest. I pray your Grace to think

not that I seek to defend him, for he hath in any case broken the commands of God and man, and meriteth chastisement of both; but I am not, like this Knight his brother, ashamed to speak praise or blame of him—I shame not, my liege, to own that I have loved him as my own son, and that I now sorrow for him like a stricken father."

The Prior paused a moment, overcome by his emotion, and the King waited for him with a patience begot of the old man's reverence. Presently the latter continued—

"But while I defend not what he hath done, my liege, I would humbly plead with God and your Grace that he hath himself been deeply sinned against, and that all these evils have been born of that one wickedness which your Grace wotteth of. His mother, my liege, lost both life and honour, and he himself his rightful place in the world, which methinks he would have filled worthily, through that lustful lie which hath bred so many mischiefs. As a young child, my liege—nay, plucked, almost, from his mother's dead body—he was brought to me and given into my keeping; and he grew up under my very eye, and many noble qualities showed their roots in him, which, verily, in a right ground might have blossomed and borne fruit both to his own and your Grace's glory; but which, alas! were not suited to our soil, and would not thrive in it, though I spent much labour both on it and them, and earnestly entreated God to bless the harvest!"

Once more the Prior paused, and the tears coursed down his cheeks as he went on—

"Truly, my liege, he hath been guilty of these offences, and I seek not to screen him from the blame of them. I wot

well—albeit, had he been any other, his cause was a just one —that he did great wrong in lifting his hand against your Grace's Knight who had slandered his mother; but, my liege, it *was* his mother, and he is very young, and the blood of his race runneth warmly in him: nevertheless——"

Here the King interrupted the Prior by saying shortly—

"Let that pass, Reverend Father. As for his killing the villain who betrayed his mother, thou and his Grace of Canterbury might have settled that between you for any finger we should have raised to help or hinder you. Yet thou must needs admit, Reverend Father, that it argueth a hole in thy House's discipline for a monk to have had so much leisure to learn fencing, and after that as great freedom to practise it."

The Prior felt this rebuke, and his conscience a little troubled him for the liberty he had accorded his favourite disciple in the hope of making his path sweeter to him. The King, however, came to his relief by quickly adding—

"But what sayest thou to this other offence, Reverend Father? By the Rood, to steal a daughter and a plighted bride, and then to kill her father—that will pass thy wit in defending!"

"I desire not to defend it, my liege, nor him either," replied the Prior, "but only to pray your Grace of your worth and justice to consider the other side of it; for indeed, my liege, there is another side to it, though I wot that it is dark enough on every side, and truly the blow hath fallen very heavily on my years, and I had not looked for such an answer to my hopes and prayers. Nevertheless, though the present wickedness be proved, I like not to see a brother run so nimbly to

the charge against his own father's son—his own flesh and blood, my liege—and methinks this Knight, who is so ready to show the blame, hath forgotten to tell your Grace that she whom he calleth his promised bride flatly denied both her hand and her love to him, and that it was only to escape being forced into a thing she hated that she fled from him and her father's house. Nay, my liege, I know from a sure witness that although she and this unhappy youth fondly loved each other, they were minded to put such thoughts clean away from them, as being alike beyond their reach and their duty; and had it not been that her father kept her in close bondage, refusing her prayer to enter a convent—which, my liege, she offered to do rather than wed the choice pressed on her—verily, she would not have sent to this poor youth to help her, and he, my liege, by God's mercy, would not now stand accused of this bloody offending."

Sir Wilfrid, who had listened to this speech with a patience which only the royal presence forced on him, now sprang to answer it with a fierce rejoinder; but the King at once motioned him to keep silence, and, turning to the Prior, said in a grave tone—

"We have heard thee patiently, Reverend Father, both because we wished not to judge hastily, and moreover because we know thee to be a faithful servant alike to God and us, one as full of worth as thou art of years. Nevertheless, thou hast not greatly shifted the charge against this accused monk of thine. The account thou givest us of him is indeed a sorry one, and assuredly he hath suffered much rough jostling of the world he walketh in; but that excuseth not his present fault,

nor can we deny this bloody crime the justice due to it because he himself hath endured buffets from other knaves. Of a truth, Reverend Father, we are sore stirred by this wickedness, and we had not given thee so large a license but that we thought thou hadst some plain purpose in thus speaking to us."

"May it please your Grace to hear me, and God to show me His favour, I have such a purpose," returned the Prior earnestly. "I would now entreat of your Grace what God, indeed, hath already given me as my sacred right, but which none the less I would humbly pray your Grace to add your seal to. I pray you, my gracious liege—humbly on my knees I pray you—to leave me to deal with this strayed sheep of mine, and not to take him utterly out of the fold he hath slipped from—not to cut off his soul, the immortal soul God gave to him, from the grace and mercy which God offereth him in our Blessed Saviour! Truly, my liege, I will be bond for him, I will be bond to your Grace that he shall be punished as his fault deserveth, I will promise that he offend no more against any man, that he shall never more pass beyond our walls yonder—nay, if your Grace willeth, he shall be kept in bondage till his soul part from his erring body; only, my liege, let me have the dealing with him, leave me the last hope of my wrecked faith in him, grant me to try and lead him back to the path he hath wandered from, the blessed light his eyes have become darkened to! O, my liege—for the sake of Him Who died for the worst of trippings, and Who pitied all but did never condemn any—hear an old man's prayer, and the voice of God which speaketh in me, and stand not between Christ's mercy and one that needeth it!"

Firm as Henry was, for a moment he appeared moved by the old man's appeal, and the Prior, anxiously watching his face, and seeing the kindly look in it, had hopes that his prayer would be answered; but very soon a dark frown clouded the King's countenance, as with a gesture of impatience he motioned the Prior to rise, and said sternly to him—

"It beseemeth not thy years to kneel thus, Reverend Father, and it as little beseemeth thy craft to quote the Blessed Example of men in defence of traitors and bloody murderers. By the Rood, we perceive that thou and his Grace of Canterbury have laid your heads together, and that ye are of a mind to forestall our judgment by this pleading of thine; but we tell both thee and him that we are sore wearied of the scandal which these loose monks—and thou and his Grace wot well this is not the only strayed sheep of your flock, as ye call them, by a round reckoning—have brought upon our realm and subjects, and we mean to suffer it no longer! For thy present request, therefore, we say thee nay, Reverend Father—a thousand times, nay! and his Grace of Canterbury may take the same answer from us. We have already told him, and we now tell thee, that we mean not to have two rules or two kings for this realm of ours; and monks that choose to break our laws and to defy us shall be judged like any other of our erring subjects, or God may take back the crown He hath been pleased to lay on us!"

Becket's face flushed at this challenge, and all the militant spirit rose in him, as he promptly replied for himself and his brother Churchman—

"And I also, my liege, will lay down the crosier which God was likewise pleased to put into my hands, before I will yield up the sacred rights which He alone hath entrusted to our keeping!—Nay, my liege, it grieveth me that my voice should be lifted against your Grace in any matter, and in aught save this I am your most obedient, yea, and most loyal, servant; but, my liege, I have another Master, Who is yet higher than your Grace, or than any King that ruleth, and to Whom I dare not falter in my allegiance. From Him have I received, and to Him must I account for, the charge which your Grace now offereth to take from me, and which for that very reason I cannot consent to yield up—I cannot admit your Grace's right to deprive us of."

The cloud on Henry's face grew darker, and his eyes flashed stormily, as he listened to these words. Retorting with one of the hasty speeches which he commonly regretted, and which so often laid him open to those he combated, he said angrily—

"By our crown, your Grace speaketh to us as though *thou* wert the King of England, and we but some poor subject that humbly stood to your Grace's rating! Thou talkest very glibly, my lord Primate, of thy present place and thy present powers, but methinks thou wert seated on but a little stool until we were pleased to push thee up to one higher! Was it not our hand, and ours only, that set thee upon this seat thou now sittest on?"

Becket was not slow to take advantage of this insult, and he answered to it with a quiet dignity that contrasted well with the King's passion—

"Truly, my liege, it was your Grace that made me Primate, but it was God Who made me a priest; and as a priest I deny your right to take from me the sacred charge which God alone gave to me."

"We crave your Grace's pardon for our ignorance," rejoined Henry with bitter emphasis. "We thought that God had given us the ruling of this kingdom, and the charge over our own subjects; but it seemeth, if we rightly con your Grace's reading, that He only divided it between us and thee; and, by the Rood," added the King with gathering wrath, irritated by the calm bearing of the Archbishop, "your Grace hath the better part of the bargain, since your subjects do as they have a mind in our half of the kingdom, and then fly for sanctuary to your Grace's half—which, doubtless, we shall be told was God's good pleasure for us!"

"With all humility, my liege," returned Becket in an unmoved tone, "I submit that your Grace a little straineth the argument. It is not a question of kingdoms, nor of dividing them. Our kingdom, my liege, is of Heaven, and we maintain our right—as given us by God, and in His name and on His behalf only—to govern all that lieth within it. Beyond that, there is but one kingdom in this realm, and your Grace ruleth it."

"We *shall* rule it!" exclaimed the King passionately, "ay, and no man living, be he priest or peasant, frank or noble, that hath common blood in his veins, and a common name which he may answer to, shall dare to call himself free of our royal summons! Thine argument, my lord Primate, is a somewhat strange one, and thy kingdom, which thou vouchsafest

to us, stranger still; for what, in sooth, is a kingdom without subjects? and your Grace loppeth a goodly bough, and a goodly cluster of leaves, from this royal tree of ours!"

Becket kept silence for some moments, as though to give the King leisure to cool himself; and then he said, in as calm a voice as before—

"Methinks, my liege, this is not a matter to make a quarrel of—I say it with all respect to your Grace. A crime hath been committed by one of our own servants, and we claim but a master's right to punish it. Your Grace's argument of subjects crossing into another realm cutteth on our side also, for what order might we hope to maintain if our servants (as perchance would happen were this present proposal agreed to by us) had the freedom to break our rules, and then fly to your Grace for judgment? Verily, my liege, as I made bold to say before, if fathers are to be denied the punishment of their children's trippings, small discipline is to be looked for in the house; and I pray your Grace to think of it."

"And we tell *thee* also again," replied the King sternly, "that if subjects are to commit crimes and fly from judgment, there is small discipline in that realm which admitteth it, and by our crown, my lord Primate, we mean *not* to admit of it! We pray your Grace, in our turn, to think of the crime charged, which, forsooth! thou art pleased to call a 'tripping.' Here is a loose monk who stealeth the daughter of an honoured knight—we say nothing of the promised bride of another—and after that murdereth him, because, we presume, he ventured to protest against the shame done to him! By the Lord that crowned us, had this villain been a common

man, we had hanged him for the half of this foul deed of his; and we see not, because he is a frocked monk, why the less we should do him justice, and our peaceful subjects also!"

The Primate made no response to this speech; and the King, turning to those around him, added in a loud voice—

"What think ye, my lords and gentlemen—ay, and our loyal lieges of the Church likewise? Is it well, think ye, for the peace of our good subjects, and the government of this realm, that we have two laws and a separate justice; and that loose monks be held free to spoil and murder, while ourselves be without voice in their judgment?"

As the King spoke he looked keenly at the lord Mareschal; and that prudent officer, seeing that a reply was expected from him, but knowing the perils of the ground he stood on, answered with some care—

"In truth, my liege, I like not to cross blades with my lord Primate, for whose zeal and wisdom, and his friendship also, I have, and ever have had, a great regard: nevertheless, my liege, I own that I think your Grace hath the better of the present argument, and I doubt if it be well for your Grace's realm—ay, my liege, or for the Church either—that the laws should apply diversely to divers persons; and, with due respect to my lord Primate and all who hold with him, I opine that the time is now ripe for making the change which your Grace hinteth at."

Becket still vouchsafed no response, either to the King or the lord Mareschal, but stood firmly regarding them with that proud silence which only less than the sturdy eloquence of his tongue, and, formerly, the as sturdy prowess of his arm,

awed and discomfited his enemies. Irritated, probably, by the Primate's cool bearing, the King waited for no more discussion of the point at issue, but said impatiently to the lord Mareschal—

"We thank thee, my lord, for thy opinion, and thy advice also, which it is our purpose soon to follow. We mean shortly to summon a council to discuss this matter, and his Grace of Canterbury and our other prelates shall then assist us in making good the hole which your lordship hath pointed out to us. For the present issue, in spite of his Grace's doubts, we shall now presume to settle it on our own authority."

Here the King once more turned to the old soldier, Oswald, and said in a kindly tone to him—

"We pray thee inform us, my worthy fellow, where this villain is now hiding who hath done this bloody deed thou hast told us of?"

The time had passed for leaving the evil alone, and Oswald felt that this dark secret, which yesterday was his own, was to-day the common property of all the world. Without more ado, therefore, he gave the information demanded of him; whereupon the King asked Fitzurse whether he were acquainted with the place and the house which the old servant had just named. The Knight making answer that he knew not either, the same question was put to Sir Wilfrid Alderic, who replied promptly—

"I am sorry, my liege, to say that I know it very well. The house belongeth to an old servant of my late father, one, I fear, who hath long aided in his wicked schemes this bloody traitor to our name and honour."

The King reflected a moment, and then said—

"Wouldst thou be willing, Sir Knight, to lead a company of our guard to arrest this traitor, or at least to point out the place where he hideth? We wot well how thou standest in the matter, Sir Knight, and thou hast but to say thou dislikest the errand, and we will not press it on thee."

Many eyes were bent on Sir Wilfrid, and many ears listened for his answer; but the Knight heeded them not, as with a look of vindictive triumph he said quickly—

"I count him no brother of mine, my liege, who hath done the things which he hath done, and I am ready to assist your Grace in bringing him justice. Methinks it is the least my family can do to mend this mischief, though they had no willing hand in its making."

The King looked somewhat strangely at Sir Wilfrid as he heard this reply, but he thanked him for his proffered service, and calling forward a company of the royal guard, commanded them to follow the Knight and to obey his orders. This charge was no sooner given than Becket, turning suddenly to the Prior, said in a firm voice—

"I pray thee, Reverend Father, hast thou any yeomen in thy employ whom thou canst now send to fetch back this errant monk of thine?"

The Prior answered in a low tone, which reached not to the King, that he could furnish a small body of men, but added that it would first be necessary for him to return to the Priory, whereby much time would be wasted; and the Primate then said, loudly enough for all to hear him—

"It will be better, then, to lend thee some of our own men,

for they are ready to start at once. I pray thee, will it be too great a burden on thy years to take the leading of them?"

The Prior was about to reply when the King, his face swollen with fury, and in a voice that shook with passion, called out to him—

"We command thee by thy fealty to our crown, Reverend Father, that thou settest not thy foot in this matter—no, nor layest thy hand, neither, on this villain we have sent to fetch to us! By the Rood, thou hadst best remember who is King here, and take good heed to thyself that thou playest not the traitor!"

"And I command thee," said Becket, with no whit less of authority in his tone, "by thy fealty to God and His Church, to do what I have bidden thee; and I wot thou art no traitor to either, that I need warn thee to play thy part faithfully."

For a few moments the King's wrath, as he listened to these words, threatened to pass even royal bounds, and not a few of both his and the Primate's friends watched him with anxious faces, fearful that some disaster would follow the storm which stirred him. Presently, however, whether prompted by his own prudence or by the sight of the scared looks around him, he mastered himself sufficiently to make answer, with a semblance of his opponent's proud placidity—

"Very well, my lord Primate: be it even as thou choosest. Thou hast been pleased to defy thy King, and to throw thy gage to him; and, by our crown which thou now insultest, we accept thy challenge, and will fight the issue to its uttermost end with thee!" Then he added—"But remember, my lord Primate, this is treason—black treason, my lord Primate, to

the very hilt—and we shall hold your Grace accountable for all that falleth of it!"

"It would be treason to God, my liege, were I to do otherwise," returned Becket firmly; "and, though it grieveth me to thwart your Grace, it is better that I offend my Earthly King than my Heavenly one, and I pray your Grace to judge me by that issue."

Henry deigned no further reply, but, turning sharply from the Primate, commanded Sir Wilfrid to set forward at once upon his errand. At the same moment the Archbishop gave a similar order to the Prior; and thus it fell that the two packs of hounds (as they might be called), representing the two rival hunters Church and State, slipped their leashes almost at one bound, and ran almost neck and neck together, in quest of their unconscious quarry, our unlucky hero, who might also have been likened to a stag; and this was the only sport fated to take place that day for the diversion of the gay company the King had summoned to his great hunting-bout—a hunt which, as our present Chronicler tells us not, but as common history does tell us, ended neither with the royal Forest it began in, nor with the quarry it first challenged, but, following a wider trail through Clarendon and Northampton, ran to bay and killed game yet mightier and nobler—whose death-cry still echoes, and will ever echo, across the spreading gulf of the years—in the pillared groves of sainted Canterbury.

CHAPTER VI

A NICHE WITHOUT AN IMAGE

UNDER the twofold influence of his companion's sanguine temper and the stir of making ready for their enterprise, Bernard's spirit had a little roused from the depression which had fallen on it, and as they descended the rough hill-track on their return home the young Benedictine left Redwald to the task of leading down the horses, and ran eagerly before him to inform Rosamond of their success and to prepare her for their departure.

There are moments in life when the heart leaps at a bound to the joy or sorrow that is waiting for it, and when Bernard reached the old soldier's cottage, and found the door standing open, he at once shuddered and turned chill beneath the dark shadow which he felt had passed over him. For an instant he played with his doubt, dallied with his dread—in his wild sense of impending evil tried to jest with the terror that had clutched and was strangling him, seeking to believe that Rosamond was but hiding from him and planning a childish surprise to make him merry—as if she, forsooth, whose heart beat on thorns, would waste the last grains of their falling sand upon a school-girl's fancy! Bernard thought of this, and even smiled at his folly; but he thought, too, that Rosamond would at least have broken the terrible silence which was choking him, that she would have run quickly to meet him, that ere now her warm arms would have been twined around his neck, and her blessed

kiss—ah! was that to be never more for him?—would have driven this deathly chill from his heart, and stirred again the fire there—that fire which only burned for her, and which would go out when her hand ceased to tend it!

With a groan that echoed through the empty portal, Bernard broke from these thoughts, and, hastily entering the house, sought the room where he and Rosamond had briefly lived and loved. Now, only the ghost of that love, dead or lost—for the nonce it mattered not which—dwelt in it. This little room, which so lately could scarce contain the wealth of love that filled it, now all too great for the shadowy spectre that stalked alone in it! Verily it was haunted, and by the most grisly of shapes—the place was yet warm with the beloved dead that had lain there! Bernard, with the keen eye of grief, saw and noted all—every sign, every memory. Little remnants of Rosamond lay about, that, like children, seemed to lift their arms to the bereaved lover, in the vain hope of helping to stop the gap, which they only widened. At least they served to rouse Bernard from his stupor, as with a wild cry he started from his gaze on them, and shouting—"Rosamond, Rosamond, Rosamond!" till he was hoarse, hurried from room to room, and then into the dark forest beyond; still calling "Rosamond!" still hoping to find her somewhere—hoping against hope and the mocking echoes that alone answered him, and hanging desperately to the faith that God and the World would not be so cruel as to wholly take his one joy from him!

Then, the great Forest answering no more to his cry than the great Sea does to those who demand its pity, he rushed

back to the cottage and the empty rooms, trusting, though he believed not in his trust, that Rosamond had now returned there. Standing in the portal, eking out his slender hope like a jealous miser, he again repeated his call of "Rosamond, Rosamond!" half-persuading himself that she must at last answer and run to meet him; but once more he had for reply only the echoes of his own voice, the sound of which began to frighten him, for it seemed to his excited fancy like the living disturbing the dead!

As he a second time entered the little room he again noted, but now more leisurely, the signs of his lost companion's presence. Rosamond's lamp was still burning, though he had not before heeded it; and a broidered glove, which she had been mending, was lying on her vacant chair, where she must have hastily thrown it. Bernard cast himself down beside this chair—where so lately he had knelt at Rosamond's feet, gazing at her as some devotee worships at a shrine—and prayed to God to give her back to him, vowing his life and his grateful service in return for that one mercy.

Then, presently, another mood seized him, and he bitterly cursed his wretched life and crooked fate, and all the miseries which, through no fault of his, had fallen upon him—flinging, in his agony, the blame on God and Heaven, and, since these would have none of him, bidding the Devil do his best for, or his worst with, him.

Finally—as is common when mind or body has reached the limit of endurance—a reaction followed, and his surcharged soul saved itself in tears. Great shocks set the thoughts working, and seem to open a vista in a whole life as through

a sharp chasm; and Bernard almost smiled through his tears as he suddenly remembered weeping when a little child because he might not play with his father's sword—that very sword his eyes had just chanced to glance at. This thought, however—the contrast with what he was now weeping for—maddened him afresh, and once more he fled forth to the forest, and flung himself beneath a great oak (perchance the same one that months ago had listened to his first complainings), burying his face in the dead leaves, and clutching the damp sods with his stretched-out fingers.

Here the old soldier, following the sound of his groans, at length found him; and, himself taken aback by the sight of his young master's grief, could only gasp breathlessly—

"Why—Master Cuthbert, Master Cuthbert—what hath happened to thee?"

Bernard started at his follower's voice, and in low, hoarse tones, but without looking up, answered—

"What hath happened to me? What hath ever happened to me but evil only? Evil from the hour of my birth to the last breath of my wretched life—would to God it were now come to me! Evil, evil, evil! I tell thee, that word spelleth all! It covereth all—yea, all that God or man, or the Devil and my accursed fate, ever devised for me!"

"But thou wilt not mend it, Master Cuthbert—faith, whatever it be, thou wilt not make it better by lying there and weeping over it," replied the old man stolidly. "By our Lady, tell me what hath happened, and we will see if we cannot yet make the matter straight for thee. Anyways, Master Cuthbert, 'tis better for thee to be working than weeping."

Bernard sprang to his feet so suddenly as almost to startle his companion, despite the latter's steady nerves.

"Hast thou been into yonder house of thine?" he said in a sharp, stern whisper, and pointing as he spoke in the direction of the old soldier's dwelling.

"Not yet, Master Cuthbert," returned Redwald quietly. "I was delayed with one of the horses that had got a stone in its shoe; and then I heard thee crying down here, so ran first to see what was wrong with thee."

Bernard still pointed to the cottage, as though he would have the old man go to it, but Redwald quickly added—

"'Tis no matter, Master Cuthbert. I understand thee that she is not there; but 'tis no use thy standing still and weeping for her. She is not lost to thee yet—mass, many things happen 'twixt to-day and to-morrow, and so long as ye both live and love there is hope enough to mend the business. 'Tis like what I feared for thee hath now fallen; and that was why I advised thee to stay behind, and leave me to fetch the horses. However, 'tis no use crying over spilled milk, Master Cuthbert—better go back to the cow, and fill the bowl again."

If there were a flaw in Redwald's comparison it mattered not to Bernard, who scarcely heeded his follower's meaning, though the cheery tones of the old man's voice served to rouse him a little from his lethargy.

"But a few hours back," he said gloomily, "when I told thee of that accursed mischance, and asked thee if there were aught left for me save to die, thou didst bid me live and hope; and verily I took thy counsel, and what hath come of it? Dost thou still advise me to live—still to hope?"

"Ay, Master Cuthbert—I advise thee to do both," answered Redwald promptly: to which Bernard rejoined with fierce impatience—

"And for what, I pray thee? By Heaven, what is the one without the other, and what hope have I to live an hour for? Live! To give my fate and the cursed fiend that dealeth it out to me another triumph, and myself a deeper draught of this damning torment! Had they—had Hell and the demon that followeth me—struck me in any other joint, had they left me this one beam in all my prison-gloom—I had not stayed here to weep while my heart and my hand had motion! But I wot they are wise in their choosing; or rather," he added bitterly, "they had no choice to be wise in—they had but one mark to aim at, and they have hit it!"

The old man was well-pleased to hear his companion talk, and he helped the flow by damming it a little, saying to Bernard—

"Nay, Master Cuthbert, thou art but wounded, not killed; and I myself have fought many a battle—ay, and helped to win them, too—with as bad a hurt as a man could choose to carry. I warrant——"

"Not in the heart—thou wast not stricken in the heart," broke in Bernard hastily: "a man cannot fight that is wounded there, be he the best that ever wielded weapon! I tell thee I could fight, and dare meet, ay, and die in it, any odds of fair foes that fronted me—but not with my friends turned against me—traitors, Redwald—I wot that cooleth the courage in one! Thou knowest, Redwald, that she hath left me—my only friend, save thee, out of yonder prison—and joined mine enemies;

and, by Heaven, I cannot fight all the world—I alone, and in darkness, with no hand to hold a light for me!"

"She is no traitor to thee, I'll be sworn to it, Master Cuthbert, and I'll warrant her to hold a light for thee so long as she hath a hand to help thee," returned Redwald in a tone of decision. "Faith, Master Cuthbert, thou must not jump too quickly. Thou findest her flown, but thou knowest not the manner of her flying. Maybe she went not of her own freedom. Her father's people may have fetched her, or have pretended that he sent for her, or——"

"Any other marvel which hath not happened, and which thou believest not," again broke in Bernard with bitter mockery. "I wot, my good Redwald, thou only sayest it to give me comfort. Could I but think that she had thus been taken from me, even though I had lost her sweet presence, I tell thee it would be some easement to me, and I would still hope—at least count the blessed moments I had spent with her—knowing that she still loved me; but to feel that she hath left me without grief or greeting, that she hath listened to my enemies without waiting for me to answer a word back to them—by our Lady, it maketh the heart bankrupt, Redwald—it is worse than death—for it spareth not a shred to Hope, it leaveth not to Love even a memory!"

Redwald reflected for a few moments, and then he said—

"Thou agreest with me, Master Cuthbert, that we are not to slack this chase of ours till the game is lost to us?"

"If thou meanest," answered Bernard, "that, being reft of everything, I am to smile as gaily, and play my part as pleasantly, as if I had lost nothing, then I fear I do *not* agree

with thee. I am not a child, that I can make believe in the riches I have not."

"I mean," said Redwald, "that we are now going to find thy young lady, and to know the reason why she hath left thee, or rather, as I believe, hath been taken from thee. Promise me, Master Cuthbert, that thou wilt not give thyself to this despair of thine till thy young lady herself maketh thee free to it?"

Bernard reflected a little, in his turn, ere he replied moodily—

"Be it so. I have been long enough the sport of my ill-destiny, and I would as lief be thine. Do, therefore, as thou wilt with me. It is not easy for the desperate to deny despair, but I will at least promise thee to *act*. Come, then: let us seek her even as thou sayest; and if I find half the love she swore to keep for me, I will be content to live or die as God chooseth!"

Redwald was no little pleased with having wrung this promise from his young master, but he only remarked in a quiet tone—

"We must be content, Master Cuthbert, to wait for the dawn—'twill not speed us, running too quickly. I pray thee come back with me to the house yonder, and let us talk over this business in a warm corner. 'Tis a poor lodging for thee here, Master Cuthbert, and thou hast a good day's work on the morrow."

Bernard started at his follower's mention of the deserted cottage, and he said sharply—

"No, by Heaven! It is enough to suffer death without

looking on it! Go thyself, if thou hast a mind to, but I will never more enter that door until she calleth me!"

"As thou wilt, Master Cuthbert," rejoined the old man composedly. "We can talk as well here as there; but give me leave to light a fire to keep the wolves off."

Bernard made no objection to the proposed precaution, though he laughed bitterly at it.

"By the mass," he said, "thou art like a man going to be hanged making sure of the ladder ere he mounteth it!" Then he added—"But, after all, it is not thou which hast to hang, and thou doest well to keep a whole skin on thee. For my part, the poor beasts are welcome to make a meal of me, and I would as soon fill their bellies as those of their betters."

"Thou art wrong, Master Cuthbert," replied the old soldier with a touch of reproach. "What the devil do I care for my skin, that shall soon be casting it? And thou wilt think better of thine own presently, when thou seest thy young lady and hearest her answer to thee.—I only run with thee, Master Cuthbert, and after that the kennel!"

"Forgive me," exclaimed Bernard, eagerly stretching out his hand to the old man. "By our Lady, thou art worthy of a better service, Redwald, for I am too sad even to be civil, though methinks I am not ungrateful—in my heart, at least, or what is left of it."

Redwald grasped his young master's hand without speaking, and then at once set about collecting some dry branches and getting them lighted. This being done, he sat himself down by the fire, and said thoughtfully—

"I have been thinking, Master Cuthbert, that yonder gossip of mine, Oswald, hath been at the bottom of this business, and I will tell thee why——"

"Thou hast no need to tell me," interrupted Bernard. "When he came to fetch me to that black trysting he bade me beware of lifting my hand against the Knight his master, and swore, if I did so, that he would follow me to the world's end for vengeance. I doubt not he hath had the making of this mischief; though how I wot not, unless, as he also promised, he hath proclaimed me a murderer and traitor, and she hath believed his tale without waiting for my answer; which," added Bernard gloomily, "seemeth to be the way with love—bubbles blown on a fair sky, to be broke by the first storm-wind!"

"Thou knowest not so much yet, Master Cuthbert," returned Redwald. "'Tis like enough, as I just said to thee, that he may have told her that her father had sent for her, perchance that he was ill, and so got her to go back with him to yonder castle. Nevertheless, Master Cuthbert, I would thou hadst told her thy tale thyself, when thou first camest home to her. 'Tis always better to blame oneself than leave others to damn us, and I did wrong to advise thee to keep silence. It is easy, though, to see a hole when we have tripped into it, and I had not looked for this thing that hath befallen us."

"I dared not speak to her—I had not the heart," replied Bernard with gathering gloom. "By the Rood, when I came back to her, she noticed an accursed stain on my doublet here—could I tell her that it was the blood of her own father?"

"Mass, and what didst thou tell her?" asked the old man eagerly.

"I did what my soul loathed, more especially to her," answered Bernard in a low voice—"I lied to her. I told her that I had been attacked by a wolf in the forest, and that what she looked on was the blood of the beast I had slain. I would to God, *now*, that I had told her the truth, and stood her judgment on it!"

Redwald could scarce smother the groan that rose in him: nevertheless, for his young master's sake, he made shift to say with desperate composure—

"It was a mistake, Master Cuthbert. Truth needeth least mending, and it was not like thee to tell a lie to any one—mass, thou must have lost thy wits over that cursed accident!" Then, in as cheery a tone as he could muster, he went on—"It may be mended yet, Master Cuthbert, and it becometh not men to despair while the heart beats in them. We must find thy young lady, and thou must tell her thyself how the thing happened, and I warrant she will forgive thee. A woman that loveth as she loveth will not wait till summer for melting. Come, let us talk no more of it, Master Cuthbert, but see if thou canst sleep a little. 'Tis a hard bed, but thou wilt not choose a better one, and 'twill put thee in good heart for to-morrow."

Bernard again laughed bitterly at the notion of his sleeping, but the old soldier added—

"'Tis no jest, Master Cuthbert, I promise thee. Sorrow often rocketh a man to sleep where joy joggeth him all the night long. I remember the night I lost my poor dame—and

God knows that was a heavy buffet, Master Cuthbert!—I slept till the cock and sunrise. By the mass, though, 'twas an ill-waking—a very ill-waking!"

A long silence followed this speech, and Bernard, who had thrown himself down by the fire, and lay moodily watching the flames, presently justified the old man's argument by indeed falling to sleep. Redwald ever and anon looked at him with a curious smile as he slept on through the remaining hours of the night, and even past the dawn—a heavy slumber, such as befitted a heavy sorrow, yet lighted by some fitful flashes of dream.

Bernard dreamed that he was once more in the little cottage, lying by his beloved Rosamond, his head pillowed on her breast, and her arms thrown about his neck. Presently, as the dawn filled the room and the darkness slowly emptied itself, he raised his head to look on the fair face beside him, and after gazing, lover-like, for a long while at it, was about to press a kiss on the sleeper's lips, that seemed to smile with their old sweetness on him—when of a sudden he awoke, shuddered coldly, and stared with a dazed expression at the bearded veteran who sat watching him.

"Thou hast had a long sleep, Master Cuthbert," said the old man gently, "and it will do thee good. The day hath broken, and we will now see if we cannot win some sunshine for thee."

"Would to God I had never wakened!" replied Bernard with a groan. "I was dreaming of her, Redwald, and I dreamt that I was still happy. I would that I had died in that dream, or had never dreamt it!"

"So thou shalt be happy, Master Cuthbert, never doubt it," answered Redwald cheerily. Then he added—"I have been thinking, Master Cuthbert, that thou hadst better stay here a little, whilst I go to yonder castle and see if I can find any news of this flown bird of ours. By the mass, if I meet that old devil of a gossip, Oswald, I will get the truth from him though I should have to let it out with a sword-prick! But first I will fetch the horses, and also get thee thy sword. It may be that thy young lady will come back of her own freedom, and thou canst keep thine eye on the house there without setting thy feet in it."

Bernard made no response, and Redwald, taking this as a sign of consent, hastened to do what he had proposed, fetching the horses and making them fast to some trees, and handing Bernard his father's sword; after which he said—

"Promise me, Master Cuthbert, that thou wilt wait here till I return? I will not be long, and I will do my best to bring some news to gladden thee."

Bernard moodily agreed to what his follower asked of him, and the next moment the old soldier plunged into the forest, making his way towards the late Knight's dwelling, but spending some time on the road in the search of every secret copse and clearing which seemed to offer a desperate hope of finding Rosamond. Although he had promised Bernard to act promptly, the old man lingered long over his search, and it is the opinion of our Chronicler that he wilfully dallied in it, having no hope himself of the lost lady's recovery, and trusting to time alone to moderate the fury of his young master's sorrow. Be that as it may, it was noon before Redwald

reached the clearing which surrounded the dead Knight's castle, and he had scarce stepped beyond the fringe of the trees, his quick senses sunk to sleep in a mournful reverie, ere he found himself in the presence of a company of strange yeomen, who, he noticed, were all armed and wore the royal livery. In a twinkling the old man had recognised their leader and guessed their errand, and he made a hasty movement to regain the forest shelter. This precaution came too late, however, for Sir Wilfrid, riding up to him with drawn sword, exclaimed sternly—

"Stir not a step, thou traitor, or thou diest! By the Rood, hast thou come here to look on the devil's work which thou and thy reverend partner have wrought between you?"

At that moment the old soldier thought only of Bernard, and, placing his back against a tree, so that he might not altogether be cut off from the forest, he answered quietly—

"I am not a traitor, Sir Wilfrid, and thou knowest it, and thy father knew it better still before thee. I served him faithfully in life and death, and he never once called me so, and I had not looked for a son of his to do it either."

Sir Wilfrid's face flushed with anger, and for an instant he seemed about to retort with something more than threats; but, soon mastering himself, he said in a sneering tone—

"Prove, then, that thou art not a traitor by mending some of the mischief thou hast caused. I am here by the King's orders to arrest the villain who hath foully murdered my father's best friend, Sir Edmund Dunstan. If thou art not false both to the King and me, show us where to find this bloody knave whom thou hast hidden. If thou doest that, I

will call thee a true man, and I doubt not his Grace will fitly guerdon thee."

The look of scorn which Redwald returned the Knight was at least equal to the latter's own, as he replied proudly—

"I wot well, Sir Knight, that he thou speakest of hath done no murder, nor any deed which a man need shame for; and if it becometh thee to be thy brother's hunter, it becometh not me to join in the cry after my old master's son, and, traitor though I be, I will not do it—mass, no, if thou killest me, I will not do it!"

For answer Sir Wilfrid suddenly raised his hand, and, stooping over his horse's head, struck the old man a heavy blow on the face. Redwald, who made no attempt to hinder him, received the buffet without flinching, merely saying—

"Thy father would not have done it, Sir Knight, but I wot thou art very little like him. His hand would have withered ere it had struck this old cheek of mine!"

Sir Wilfrid, who was beside himself with rage, alike at the old man's dignity and his own lack of it, here hastily called on his followers to seize Redwald and carry him with them as a prisoner. This order, however, was more easily given than obeyed, for the old soldier, who would not even defend himself from his late master's son, had no scruples regarding those who now attacked him, but, drawing his sword, used it with such effect as to quickly win the respect of his assailants; to whom, nevertheless, he presently left the field of battle, and all the glory they might find in it—that is to say, taking advantage of the first lull in their onset, he suddenly turned about and sprang into the forest, and running, like a stag

rather than a man, through the mazy windings of the wood, was speedily lost both to view and to pursuit. Sir Wilfrid's men, indeed, had they been able, were not very eager to overtake their quarry; and their angry leader, who was the only one of the party mounted, though with a fierce oath he dashed in pursuit of the fugitive, soon had to abandon his efforts, and rest content with resuming the original chase—hurrying forward in the worst of tempers, and with the not too certain hope of reaching the destined goal before the old man who had outwitted him.

On his side, Redwald, who knew every twist and turn of the forest, and so cut the feet off his enemies' furlongs, returned to his post much quicker that he had left it, and it was not long ere he rejoined his waiting companion, and gave him, as soon as he had breath enough, an account of his adventure. The news proved better medicine to Bernard's depressed spirit than all the old man's comfort and counsel had been, and he started to his feet with something of his former energy, as he said fiercely—

"By the mass, Redwald, I desire nothing better, and I promise thee I will leave a mark for the King to remember me by! As for the coward who leadeth these lackeys—though I may not serve him as his shame warrants, I will read him a lesson that shall last his knighthood for a twelvemonth!"

Redwald smiled with joy at his young master's return to life, but he shook his head gravely at the proposed encounter.

"No, no, Master Cuthbert," he said with a laugh, "we will dine off a better dish than that. We will go to thy young

lady, and persuade her to fly with us, and then—the Devil catch him that stayeth to tie his shoe-latchet!"

The old soldier clapped his hands for glee of his own pleasantry, but as quickly added—

"The Devil take *me*, Master Cuthbert, for forgetting that we know not where to look for her! Mass, now, I would a fairy might wing here and whisper it to us!"

At this moment, as though in response to Redwald's wish, there suddenly appeared—not a fairy, but an apparition almost as welcome, and more substantial—the hound Rollo, wagging his tail, and showing every other symptom of delight which a dog is in the secret of. The old soldier, no less pleased, fairly hugged the rough neck of his dumb companion in his joy at seeing him.

"Body of mine, I had forgotten him, Master Cuthbert," he cried excitedly, "and I tell thee the poor boy will do the very trick for us we were just praying for! Dost thou not see," he went on, as Bernard seemed insensible of their new ally's value, "that he hath followed thy young lady to her hiding-place, and hath now come back to tell us of it? Anyway, Master Cuthbert, he *will* tell us of it, and thou shalt soon see the proof of what I promise thee; but, faith, we have no time to waste in gossiping. I pray thee mount one of the horses, Master Cuthbert, and let us be starting, and thou shalt see how this cunning fellow will play the guide for us."

Saying which, Redwald quickly loosed the horses, he and Bernard each mounting one, while they led a third between them; and then the old man stooped down and whispered something in Rollo's ear. The dog seemed in no trouble to

understand him, for he pricked up his ears with a look of profound intelligence, and at once started off at a slow trot in the direction from which he had just come. Redwald and the young Benedictine lost no time in following him, and both he and they soon disappeared down the wide forest track mentioned in a former chapter of this history; the old soldier remarking to his companion as they jogged along, himself in high humour, and even Bernard with a touch of hope in his heart—

"He is a good dog, Master Cuthbert—the best ever whelped; and he is going to show us the best trick to-day he hath played since he was a blind puppy!"

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST WHISPER OF THE WOODS

Our Chronicler, who, as we have before hinted, keeps very much to the broad track of his story, and troubles himself but little with the small paths that run into or beside it, tells us nothing of the particular Convent to which Rosamond had fled, and whither her lover and his faithful attendant were now following her. He does not even inform us of its name, nor the place where it stood, nor indeed of anything concerning it; and we have to fashion out of our own wits, if the puzzle be worth the piecing, all these details, and many more. We who edit these remains, having our doubts, spent much

time in trying to solve the riddle, but to no purpose: we found nothing in the history of the Conventual Houses of the neighbourhood at all to answer to our notion of our Chronicler's meaning, and we came to the conclusion that for some reason he desired to keep the thing a secret, and so had thrown a veil over it—a veil which, so far as we are concerned, must remain unlifted.

Wherever this Convent may have been, and whatever it may have been called, our record informs us that on the afternoon of the fateful day whose doings we have partly related Rosamond and the Lady Abbess were seated together in a certain great room, or hall, of the said Nunnery, engaged in earnest conversation. Mistress Edith was also present, but she sat some way apart, and appeared to take little interest in her companions' discourse, being occupied with her own thoughts, which seemingly were sufficient for her. On her side, Rosamond had been once more telling the story of her sorrow, and the sad events which had brought her to her present refuge; and as she ended the Abbess tenderly kissed her, saying in a gentle voice—

"Thine is indeed a heavy sorrow, my child, but God will give thee comfort for it, and thou hast done well to bring thy burden to Him. Verily, thy father greatly erred, and much trouble hath thereby fallen, in not permitting thee to come hither when thou didst first desire him. Alas! my child, I, too, have to mourn one that was very dear to me, and we will weep together for him—ay, my child, and what is better, pray together to God to bless his soul, and to make it meet for the glorious service it hath been called to!"

For some moments after this speech the Abbess sat in silence, and her tears fell almost as fast as Rosamond's. At length, taking her companion's hand in hers, she suddenly said—

"Tell me, my child: dost thou still love this evil man who hath broken his vows, and taken the life of thy poor father?"

Rosamond started at these words almost as she had done when Mistress Edith first accused her lover to her, and she answered somewhat sharply—

"I pray thee, my Mother, do not speak of him harshly to me. I know well what he hath done, and I mean not to see him more; but I cannot forget what he hath been to me, nor the vows that I have sworn to him, which indeed I had not now broken for any cause save this!" Then, once more weeping at the memories she had thus stirred, she went on—"I know, my Mother, that thou deemest those vows sinful, and of little worth; but I regarded them, and he was to me as my husband—yea, and he is still, though as one dead and lost to me—and I cannot bear to hear evil spoken of him!"

"I see, my child, that thou still lovest him," replied the Abbess sorrowfully, "and though the bond is a sinful one, I cannot blame thee—at least, not at present. I wot it is not easy to cast out love from our weak hearts, and thou hast a heavy burden to carry, and it will take time for thy young neck to bear the yoke laid on it."

"I love him still, and I shall love him always," returned Rosamond in a low voice. "Truly, Mother, I should be a

traitor to my own heart, if I did less; and if I did more," added the girl with a look of doubt and distress that moved her companion's pity, "I wot well I should be a traitor to my poor father!"

The Abbess was full of compassion for her unfortunate guest, but she was also a little in dread at the perilous doubt which she feared divided her. Therefore she said gravely, though gently—

"I trust, my child, that thy feet will never turn back, nor thine eyes look again, to yonder path God hath given thee the grace to fly from."

"Should I be here, my Mother, if it had been possible?" answered Rosamond in a mournful tone. "Verily, I could not dwell with the man that had killed my father—I say not *murdered*, Mother, as yonder woman calleth it, for I believe not, even now, that one so gentle and so noble ever willingly lifted his hand against an old man and the father of her he loved. Nevertheless, his hand *was* stained with my father's blood, and I could not have borne to stay longer with him—by our Lady, Mother, the thought was horrible!" Rosamond covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the fearful vision of the past night, and then continued—"I thought, Mother, and I hoped, that I should have died when they first told me of it; but since God would not have it so, I came hither to thee; and I pray Him and our Lady to have pity on me, and to help my soul to bear the burden!"

The Abbess tenderly stroked the fair head that was bowed over her knee in sorrow, and she said softly—

"God will help thee, my poor child, do not doubt of it.

There is no sorrow that He hath not suffered, and knoweth not how to heal, in His blessed function of Man and Saviour; and, though He hath not Himself sinned, He wotteth well the measure of temptation, and wotteth, too, the measure of pity for it."

Here Mistress Edith rose from her seat, and, approaching her two companions, said to the Abbess—

"I also, my Mother, have a heavy burden to bear, and one I am as weary of. I have done this poor child a great mischief, for which I am now sorry. I wot it is past my weeping for: nevertheless, I would that I had left vengeance to God, and had been content with the sorrow He sent me."

"And what was thy cause of vengeance, my sister?" asked the Abbess, with a glance of surprise at her strange visitor. "Truly, it is a terrible thing to take vengeance into our own hands; and for thee, my sister——"

"I have told thee that I repent of it," interrupted Mistress Edith a little impatiently, "even though I had bitter cause for it. This same monk, this Cuthbert Alderic, slew the man I loved—the only friend I had—the late Knight Sir Eustace Devereux. I doubt not thou hast heard speak of him, and of his bloody death at the King's tournament?"

"I have both seen and heard of Sir Eustace Devereux, but I knew not that he had been wedded," replied the Abbess in a tone of increased surprise. Then, seeing the flushed face of her visitor, she added quickly—"But pardon me, my sister. I am very ignorant of the world beyond these walls, and I meant not to cause any pain to thee."

"It matters not," answered Mistress Edith, speaking

almost in a whisper, "and it is time for me as well to forget the world." Presently, after a pause, she went on—"Thou shalt judge of the offence now, Mother, for I would fain talk no further of it to thee or any one. I was scarce more than a child when I was carried off from my father's house by the man I hated, but afterwards came to love. It broke my father's heart, and my mother's also, and I swore bitterly to be revenged on the hand and heart that had wrought this mischief; but we cannot always weep or think of vengeance, and by and by I ceased to do either, or to look on my betrayer as an enemy. I was very young, and the Knight was kind to me, and, moreover, I had no other home or friends left to me—was it wonderful that I came to smile on the bonds I had hated, to kiss the hand I had cursed, to love the man I had vowed to be revenged on? Be that as it may, I did learn to love him, as I have loved none else, and when I saw him lying dead in yonder lists I swore on his good sword to avenge him; and truly, Mother, I have spent much pains in doing it, which now I would spend as much, were it possible, to undo again; and I humbly pray my sister here, if she can, to forgive the wrong I have done her. I wot it is too late to mend the evil, but I am sorry for it."

Horror and pity shared by turns the face of the Abbess as she listened to this ill-starred history. When her visitor had ended it, she said—

"In truth, my sister, thou hast suffered much and thou hast sinned much, but if thou repentest sincerely, as thou sayest, our Blessed Lord will both pardon thy fault and give thee comfort for thy sorrow; and our sister here will forgive thee

also," she added, gently laying her hand on Rosamond's head as she spoke. "Verily, she hath had a sore trial for her young years; but she needeth grace herself, and she will not deny the pardon which Christ yieldeth thee."

The time had yet to come, as it did come, when Rosamond could say freely that she forgave her companion in sorrow; but she presently looked up, and said to Mistress Edith—

"I do forgive thee for what thou hast done to me, but I would fain ask thee one question—when thou soughtest this vengeance on Cuthbert Alderic, didst thou know the cause which he had against the knight whom he fought and slew at the King's tournament?"

Mistress Edith hesitated a moment in some confusion. For the first time it struck her as strange that she should never have questioned the justice of the quarrel—that she should never have doubted her Knight's right and his opponent's wrong. At last she said simply—

"I did not know it. It was enough for me that my Knight was slain, and that I knew the man who had made an end of him."

"But it was not enough for him thou didst vengeance on, nor for those that loved him," returned Rosamond in a tone of bitter reproach. "Methinks, if thy Knight had been twice as dear to thee, thou mightest have been willing to play the judge ere thou didst act the executioner. I pray thee, wouldst thou have been so ready to do this thing to Cuthbert Alderic hadst thou known that thy Knight was the cause of his mother's shame and bloody death, and of his own banishment from all he loved and longed to do nobly for—ay, and might

have so done—he that now standeth accused of treason and foul murder, and through the fault of the very man thou hast wrought this evil for?"

Mistress Edith started at these words, whether in remorse or anger seemed not certain. Apparently the Abbess thought the latter, for, quickly interposing, she said—

"Nay, my daughters, let there be peace and love between you. It becometh not fellow-mourners and sisters in sorrow to dispute over the cares ye have left behind you."

"I wot well, my Mother," answered Rosamond quietly, "that it becometh us not to dispute, either in this place or in our present trouble; and indeed I desire not to make any quarrel, but only to show this lady how the path between us lieth, so that henceforth our feet may walk evenly on it and without stumbling." Then, turning again to Mistress Edith, she said—"Believe me, I speak not to cause thee pain, nor to cast a shadow on him thou hast lost; but what I tell thee hath been long known to several witnesses, and thy Knight himself, ere he died, freely owned his fault before the King, and confessed that he was punished justly."

Had the late Knight, the subject of this debate, been present—as for aught we wot he was—or her own porter, or any other person who knew the lady as she was wont to be known, it would have surprised one or all of them not a little to have witnessed the patience with which Mistress Edith received this rating. She was certainly greatly moved, but not with anger; and it was in a subdued, almost humble, tone that she replied to her fair accuser—

"I know nothing of these things, though methinks when a

young girl I heard some whispers of what thou speakest of. I pray thee tell me the whole story. As thou sayest, it may make our path plainer for us."

Thus appealed to, Rosamond related to her companion the whole history of Cuthbert Alderic and Sir Eustace Devereux, as she had received it both from the former and her father; and when she had finished, Mistress Edith, looking earnestly at her, said in a low, sad voice—

"I have done both thee and him a great wrong, for which now I can only ask God's grace and thine. I loved my Knight dearly, yea, and shall ever love him; but I own that he did a knavish deed, and was well punished for it. Verily, God hath at last read my dream for me, but it is too late. I would, for all our sakes, that I had known it sooner!"

"God's purposes are not to be fathomed, my sister," said the Abbess gravely. "We see the surface, but we cannot reckon the depth."

Then she asked Mistress Edith to tell her of her dream, and, when she had heard it, she said again—

"God's purposes are indeed wonderful! I knew this Cuthbert Alderic as a little boy, and he was the brightest-souled, blithest-hearted child, with the fairest promise of Heaven's bloom in him, ever eyes looked upon. Who would have guessed this day, and the evil things he is now accused of?"

At this moment, as though in answer to the Abbess' last words, the door suddenly opened, and that very Cuthbert Alderic she had been speaking of strode into the room, closely followed by his faithful attendant Redwald. Behind the latter

cowered the portress, trembling and terrified at this bold intrusion which she had too tardily sought to hinder. The Abbess herself was no less startled, but better controlled her emotion. Hastily bidding the portress to withdraw, she turned to Bernard, and sternly demanded why he had thus dared to break the rules and force himself into their presence. The young Benedictine, however, appeared to notice neither her nor her words: he only looked to Rosamond with wildly-imploring glance, and arms stretched out to her; as yet speechless—the echo of last night's cry, that one utterance of her name, alone breaking, like a sob, from his strained lips.

Rosamond started at the sound almost as she might have started at a call from the dead, as she stood pale and trembling, her soul tossed with doubts, and her face once more covered by her hands, dreading to meet the eyes that questioned her. Something in the silence, beyond the common pauses of life, before which the common forms of the world shrank bewildered, seemed to hold the breath of all present. The awe of it fell even upon the Abbess, who, for a time at least, forgot both her slighted rules and her private wrong in presence of the great grief that towered above them. At length the spell was broken, as seemingly it only could be, by the unhappy being who had conjured it saying in a low, faltering voice to his late companion, while he still stretched out his arms to her—

"Why hast thou thus left me, Rosamond? Was our time so long together that thou wert wearied of it? Methinks thou mightest at least have spared one more hour to wait and tell me so, and to bid me a last farewell—not to steal from me like

a prisoner flying from his jail and fearful of his jailer—I, whose kiss still lingered on thy lips, whose hand was yet warm from thine, who loved thee better than——"

Bernard paused, choked by his emotion; and Rosamond, without lifting her head, in as low a voice and as broken, made answer—

"Thou knowest why I left thee, and thou knowest that I could not have stayed; and it was better to leave thee as I did—verily, I asked God to let me die, but He would not; and I came here to weep, and to pray for our two souls; and I entreat thee do not blame me, for my burden is very heavy—yea, more than my heart can bear! I pray thee, do not add to it by blaming me!"

Bernard drew yet a little nearer to the fair form that so lately was his—now almost as far off from him as one of those airy visions which had so often mocked and maddened him—and after another pause he said mournfully, yet gently—

"God knoweth that I came not to blame thee, Rosamond, nor to add to thy burden, which God also knoweth I would gladly bear instead of thee—ay, and which He gave me the sacred right to bear for thee! I come, rather, to plead with thee, and, though I wot my voice hath no longer any music for thine ears, to remind thee of what hath been between us—yea, and yet more that was promised to be! I pray thee, hast thou forgotten it all? Are all the vows wasted which our lips uttered? Is all that sweet thrall of love and joy which bound our hearts in happy bondage snapped and broken—thrown for ever upon the ground, to idly rust and to be lightly trampled

on? Hast thou forgotten all that ever fell between us? Have the sweet woods where we first whispered, and which seemed to whisper back sweetness to us—where we last met ere thou didst leave all to follow me, and where we vowed to Heaven and our two hearts to be true and to doubt nothing—yea, until death parted us—have they no more a memory for thee? I pray thee, hast thou forgotten yonder oak beneath whose boughs thou didst own thy sweet love for me, and didst bid me, when for thy sake I would have left thee, to stay and comfort thee?—ay, and that other one, where our bond was sealed between us; when I sang to thee in the fair moonlight, and thou didst come forth to answer me, and God alone was witness to our vows—which God now bear me witness I have truly kept, but which thou hast broken, and——"

Bernard again paused in his excited speech as, Rosamond at last lifting up her head, the glance that met his own sufficiently answered his appeal, and he knew that she had forgotten nothing, that she remembered all, and as bitterly as he himself did. In her turn holding out her hands to him, and in tones of trembling entreaty, she gasped—

"Why wilt thou thus torture me? Dost thou think that I can ever forget the things thou speakest of? Verily, they are lost to me, but I cast them not away from me, they are still precious to me; and I love thee still, and shall ever love thee—God wotteth my heart hath never changed to thee, nor will ever change while I have life or thought left in me; and He wotteth, too, that I had never fled from thee for any cause save this—nay, I would have followed thee till death, even as I promised thee—ay, and beyond it!"

A wild flush of joy and hope for a moment stirred Bernard's heart, and lighted his face, as he listened to these words.

"Thou still lovest me!" he cried passionately. "Thou still singest the old music we sang together in our first gladness! Ah! Rosamond, my love—nay, more, my bride, my wedded wife!—lend but thy voice to another note of that sweet song of ours, and doubt me not while thou lovest me, and all again will be blessed joy with us! Look not, I pray thee, on that dark cloud thou pointest to—only trust me to make it clear for thee, as I swear I can and will make it clear for thee—and all will yet be well with us! Verily, Rosamond, thou fleddest from me ere I could speak a word to thee, but I will not blame thee for it—we will never more talk of it, nor of that other cloud, no, nor of aught else but our blessed happiness—only say that thou wilt come back to me, that thou wilt restore again our banished joy, our broken home! Listen, Rosamond, and thou mayst hear our horses neighing at yonder gate—they wait for us—for thee, Rosamond! Come with me, then, and let us fly together from this cruel place, and from the jealous foes that would spoil our joy for us! Come, I pray thee, and let us seek some fair hiding, some happy haven, far from hence—fair and happy as our own glad forest—where we may be free to live and love, and where none may follow to hinder us—yea, and where we may smile away these dark clouds that have dimmed the sunshine which God shed on us!"

As Bernard spoke he looked eagerly at Rosamond, and with his glance the hope that had sprung up in him died away; for he saw in the pale face that met his gaze love and pity

such as would outlive wrong and last as long as duty, but, as Heaven mocked him, not the answer his prayer sought, no sign of the grace he asked for. The chill gathered again about his heart, and the clouds thickened around him, as he scanned the dark gulf that lay between him and the being he so loved—a gulf which he began to see was impassable, which no mortal bridge, at least, would ever span. So certain was the message of doom which he read in the eyes that looked across to him—as it seemed, from an immeasurable distance—that he made a movement as though to turn and leave her; but then, quickly changing, he once more stretched out his hands to her, and, with a last passionate appeal, said—

"Thou dost not answer me, Rosamond—is it true, then, that thou dost not love me, that thou hast indeed forgotten all our vows, all our joys and sorrows—all that hath ever been between us? For the last time, Rosamond—before it be too late—I pray thee to listen to me! For the sake of those vows, for the sake of that blessed love Heaven gave to us, for the sake of this heart thou hast broken—for thine own heart, too, which is yet dearer to me—if not for these, then for the sake of the child that may be born to us, and whose lips thou mayst perchance teach to call me father—I pray thee, while there is yet time, to hear me, to have pity on me, to come back to me!"

This last appeal seemed to stir a chord in Rosamond, for she suddenly started and gazed earnestly at her lover, and the look on her face gave promise of a more gracious answer—such an one, perchance, as he prayed from her. Before she could speak, however, the Abbess, noting the change in her,

and fearful lest the voice of love should prove too strong for all the rest of the choir, gently laid a hand on her arm, and said in a firm tone—

"Courage, my child, and yield not to the whispers of this evil tempter. Remember what thou owest to God and thy murdered father, and shut thine ears to the voice that would beguile thee from thy sacred duty."

Rosamond hesitated a moment, and a painful struggle appeared to be raging in her. Presently, looking sadly yet firmly at Bernard, and speaking almost in a whisper, she said—

"I cannot go with thee as thou askest me, and I pray thee do not seek to persuade me. I love thee still, and shall ever love thee; but I cannot dwell with him that hath slain my father."

Bernard's eyes flashed, and his face grew dark, as he heard this answer.

"And who told thee," he said in a stern, harsh voice, "that I slew thy father? Verily, I have a right to know who accuseth me."

At this moment Rosamond would have given worlds to have been kneeling in her peaceful convent cell, alone with God and the sorrow that was consuming her. It seemed a mockery, a profanation even, to vex the mighty presence of this grief—this soul of a dead joy—with the pitiful arrows that had carried its death-wound. The voice of her forsaken lover, too, scared her. He, who had ever spoken in gentlest tones to her—that he should come to speak to her as he would have done to his worst enemies, as he had spoken to his scornful

brother, as she herself had heard him speak to his mother's slanderer! It was to be expected, she knew—it was the last bolt of this same sorrow, the harvest of thorns due to the path which God and her own heart had warned her of; but it was none the less sharp—the shaft went not less terribly straight to her! Nevertheless, her lover sternly awaited her answer, and she essayed to speak; but the words would not come to her. She tried to tell him of that fatal night, of Mistress Edith, of Oswald, of his own confirming falsehood; but her lips trembled and refused their mission, and she could only point silently to the strange cause of all this trouble, that mysterious lady who, with a face calmer than the heart within her, had all this while been mutely standing, a mere spectator of the tragedy she had herself planned and had played so great a part in.

Bernard turned in the direction pointed to, and gazed long and eagerly at his unknown enemy; and as he gazed a very sickness and contempt of life stole over him. He thought bitterly of all the love and faith that were to cease only with death, if then even, which a stranger's breath had sufficed to blow and scatter like the dead leaves of the forest; and he mockingly doubted if they were worth gathering again. He had come here to tell his lost companion (if need were—if love and faith demanded it) the whole story of that terrible night, to explain to her the bloody accident, and to prove to her his innocence—to entreat her pity and forgiveness—to win her back, if it might be, to the broken tryst of their eternal love-plight; but now it seemed not worth the pains: she, who believed that he had killed her father, the old man whose hand had welcomed and whose heart had warmed to him—and at

the whisper of a stranger and an enemy—truly, she could never have loved him, and Bernard's spirit rose proudly at the thoughts of it. For a long while he gazed at Mistress Edith, with almost a smile of strange wonder on his lips: then his glance wandered back to Rosamond, who shuddered at the changed look in him; and at last he spoke to her.

"By the faith of God," he said with a bitter laugh, "thou believest easily what mine enemies say of me, but I wot now that thou didst never love me!"

Then, turning to Mistress Edith, and gazing at her again with the same look of strange wonder, he said—

"I do not even know thee, fair mistress, nor had I reckoned thee among mine enemies! I pray thee, what have I ever done to thee, that thou hast been at so much pains to rob me of my only happiness?"

Mistress Edith, like her companion in sorrow, would fain have kept silence, but she replied in a low voice—

"Thou didst rob me of *my* only happiness—thou didst slay the man I loved, the late Knight Sir Eustace Devereux, and I swore on his dead body to be avenged on thee."

The bitter mockery which had possessed Bernard's face faded from it as he heard this answer, and gave place to a look that was half-stern, half-mournful.

"And dost thou know," he said, "the cause of my quarrel with Sir Eustace Devereux, and why I slew him?"

"I have just been told of it," returned Mistress Edith in as low a tone as before, "and, though I loved him better than I loved life, I own that he was fairly punished, and deserved his death of thee." Presently, after a pause, she added—"Master

Cuthbert Alderic, it is too late to repent me of what I have done, and to ask thy pardon for it: nevertheless, I am sorry for the wrong I have wrought thee, and, if thou canst, I would entreat thy forgiveness of it."

Bernard laughed the bitterest laugh ever he had laughed in his life, or ever would again.

"Thy sorrow!" he exclaimed in a tone that caused even Mistress Edith to shiver and shrink back from him—"of what use is thy sorrow to me now? By the mass, thou shouldst have thought of that before thou didst judge and condemn me, before thou didst take from me the only happiness that God had given me! I tell thee, woman," he went on, suddenly changing again to passion, and his voice trembling with fierce excitement, "I tell thee that all the sorrow of my life, all my debt of evil, was owing to this same Knight thou didst swear vengeance for—and now thou hast robbed me of the one joy which he and my fate had left to me! And for what didst thou thus damn me—for what hast thou thrust my soul into this accursed hell which now consumeth me? Forsooth, because I punished a villain who blasphemed the mother that gave birth to me! Wouldst not thou have done as much for thy mother, or bidden any man with a man's heart in him to do that grace for thee? And now thou askest me for my pardon! By the Rood, 'tis a small matter to follow the rest, and thou art welcome to it!"

Here suddenly the situation, which was becoming critical, was interrupted by a loud noise of tramping feet and contending voices in the corridor without; and, a moment after, by the opening of the door, and the entrance into the room of

those two rival parties which, like the packs of hounds we lately compared them to, had all this while been following the scent of our unfortunate hero.

Of these two parties (our Chronicler tells us) that representing the Church had been the first to arrive at the old soldier's cottage, but only to find itself, in the language of the hunting-field, "at fault," and its game "stole away." In this perplexity the Prior and his companions were presently relieved by the appearance of the veteran Oswald, who, having come for another purpose, after much earnest exhorting and some chiding, at length informed the Prior of his young mistress' flight to the Convent, and the likelihood of Bernard having followed her thither. The Prior lost no time in acting on this hint, but had scarcely departed when Sir Wilfrid and his party also appeared on the scene; and the old man, grown desperate of the evil, and deeming it to be past help or hindrance, gave the same information to the Knight which he had just given to the Prior; and thus it happened that these worthies had arrived at their common goal at the same time, though by different paths, and interrupted, as above recorded, the melancholy scene that was being played there.

As the two companies entered the room, and ranged themselves, as though by mutual consent, on either side of the door, the bewildered Abbess lifted up her hands with a gesture of anger and appeal, while she exclaimed to the rival leaders—

"In our Lady's name, what meaneth this rude violence? Tell me, Sir Knight—I pray thee, Reverend Father—what seek ye in this House of ours? By what right do ye thus

break our rules, and disturb the privacy which God and our Church have enjoined on us?"

Sir Wilfrid and the Prior stepped forward at the same moment to make reply; but the former, seizing the first speech, said quickly—

"Pardon me, Reverend Mother, but I am here by the King's command to arrest yonder traitor and murderer, whom his Grace now summoneth to answer to the crimes proved on him."

"And I, my sister," said the Prior, bending his head respectfully to the Abbess, "also pray thee to pardon this intrusion, which God wotteth I am as sorry for as thou art; but I, too, have a charge laid upon me, and one, as touching our Holy Church, of even greater authority. I am here by command of his Grace of Canterbury, to fetch back this strayed sheep to the fold he hath wandered from. Verily, my sister, he is of mine own flock, as perchance thou knowest; and I enjoin thee and all present"—here the Prior looked sternly at Sir Wilfrid's company—"that ye hinder me not in this duty, as ye shall have to answer to God and him that sendeth me!"

"I pray thee to hear a word from me also, Reverend Mother," said Sir Wilfrid in a loud voice, and in his turn glancing sharply at the Prior's followers. "I warn thee, and I warn this Reverend Father, that his Grace the King acknowledgeth not any authority in this realm of his other than that which himself wieldeth; and that he will hold as false traitors, and punish as such, all subjects that shall presume to defy his just commands." Then, turning to the Prior, he added—"I

had no warrant, Reverend Father, to meddle with thee or thy servants on our way hither; but now that we are here, and thou hast made known thine errand, I give thee fair warning that I shall treat thee and those with thee as enemies of the King my master if thou offerest to lay a finger upon yonder traitor; and, by our Lady, ye will now do it at your bodies' peril!"

The Abbess, who was greatly bewildered by these appeals from the hostile leaders, which were aimed more at each other than directed to her, returned no answer; but the Prior, indignant at the Knight's language, and not less devoted to his own cause, rejoined firmly—

"I also warn thee, Sir Knight, and those with thee, to forbear your impious hands from meddling either with me or this erring servant I am here to claim the judging of; and I tell thee as well, and the men thou hast brought with thee, that if ye stir a finger in this present matter to our hurt or hindrance, ye do it against God and at your souls' peril!"

Sir Wilfrid, for reply, at once ordered his followers to advance and seize Bernard, and, the Prior giving a similar command to the Primate's men, a conflict between the two parties appeared imminent; when of a sudden this was prevented, and both sides were brought to an abrupt pause, by the unfortunate object they were disputing over. The intended prisoner, indeed, who had thus far regarded his rival captors with stern composure, no sooner saw them advance to seize him than he drew his sword, and, quickly springing forward, bade them stand back in a voice so fierce and commanding

that they instinctively obeyed him, and even gave way a little before his threatened attack on them.

At this moment all the warlike spirit of Bernard's race flashed in his eyes, and proudly flushed his cheeks, as he—alone and friendless save for the one old man at his side—stood facing, like a roused lion, the crowd of foes that were hounded against him. Rosamond, pale and praying, woeful at the work she had caused, thought that he had never looked so noble; while Mistress Edith, who was of sterner mould, gazed at him with admiring pity, and no longer wondered that her Knight had fallen before him—nay, almost forgave him that deed of his. Boldly confronting the hostile bands that shrank back from him, and in tones that rang through the vaulted chamber, he cried to them—

"I warn you, in my turn, that ye will attack me at your peril, and that none shall take me alive save I choose it of mine own freedom!" Then, as Sir Wilfrid, ashamed of his men's halting, and burning to avenge his former defeat, sprang fiercely upon him, he broke off sharply—"Stand back, Sir Knight! I will have no blood of thine on me!—By the Rood, then——"

With a blow as sudden as it was strong, Bernard struck the Knight's weapon from his hand, and Sir Wilfrid staggered and almost fell beneath the force of the stroke dealt him. Nevertheless, all unarmed, he was about to hurl himself once more upon his brother; but before he could do so the Abbess stepped quickly between them, and, holding up the crucifix that hung at her breast, said earnestly to Bernard—

"Forbear, my son, for our Blessed Lord's sake, and add

not to the burden of thy evil deeds by taking the life of thine own brother! I pray thee——"

A smile of scorn crossed Bernard's face as he interrupted the Abbess.

"Thou misjudgest both me and my weapon, Reverend Mother," he said quietly. "I tell thee I no more sought this traitor's life than I did that of the old man I am now charged with."

As Bernard spoke he turned round and glanced at Rosamond, and with the glance all the wild longing came back to his heart for the love and joy that were lost to him. Taking a step towards her, and stretching out his hand in a last appeal to her, he exclaimed eagerly—

"Even now, Rosamond—there is still time—say that thou wilt come with me, that thou believest not what mine enemies have said of me—and we will yet find a path to freedom, we will yet win our way to love and happiness!"

Bernard pointed with proud defiance to the array of his enemies which barred the way to the joy and freedom he spoke of, and at that moment it verily seemed as though he might have won the promised goal, had the prize he prayed for only been held out to him; but no answer came from Rosamond's lips, and the next instant Sir Wilfrid, again approaching him, said with a resolute air—

"I command thee in the King's name to yield up thy sword, and to surrender thy body to the judgment his Grace hath appointed thee!"

Bernard deigned no reply to this summons, but, once more looking at Rosamond, waited for some time in silence, as

though hoping that she would yet speak to him; but still no answer coming from her, he at length turned to his brother, and said in a stern voice—

"My father's sword shall never be soiled by the hand of a coward and traitor!"

Saying which, he broke the blade across his knee, and handed the pieces to the old soldier at his side, who reverently took them from him. Then, before any one could offer to hinder him, he strode quickly towards the Primate's men, and, placing himself in their midst, said to the astonished Prior—

"I yield myself to thy judgment, Reverend Father, and I will go with thee to yonder House of thine. Verily, all my sorrows have been born in it, and it is fitting that my only joy should now be buried there!"

The Prior was well-pleased with this peaceful ending of what had promised a more bloody issue; but Sir Wilfrid was not so satisfied. Picking up his fallen sword, with a fierce oath he ordered his followers to advance and recover their prisoner, and a struggle between the two parties once more threatened, when the door was suddenly flung open, and a new set of actors appeared on the scene—namely, that company of stout foresters whom the Prior had sent to summon, and who now arrived in the nick of need to lend a hand to their venerable patron.

A cause must be very good or very desperate which prefers not retreat to facing odds of two to one, and Sir Wilfrid, though both brave and in a passion, was wise enough to yield to the inevitable, and to quit a field wherein he had no chance of

victory. Calling off his men, therefore, he sullenly prepared to return to his royal master and inform him of what had happened, comforting himself with the hope that the King would take speedy and stronger means to enforce his insulted authority. Before retiring from the scene of his defeat, however, he turned angrily to the Prior, and said in a loud voice so that all might hear him—

"So far thou hast thy way, Reverend Father, but I warn thee that the battle is not over, and that the King hath yet to learn how frocked monks and pious churchmen play the traitor with him, and set at naught his lawful authority!"

Then he added, more particularly for the behoof of the Prior's latest recruits—

"I give you all warning, likewise, who have taken a part in this outrage—and the most of you are known to me—that ye are guilty of foul treason against his Grace the King, and are like enough to be hanged for it; and, by the Rood, it shall not be my fault if ye are not!"

So saying, Sir Wilfrid swung haughtily on his heel, and made for the door; but before passing it he once more turned round, and called in a mocking voice to Bernard—

"As for thee, my militant brother, think not to escape thy deserts with a monkish whipping! I will be bond that the King will send to fetch thee yet, and will punish thy bloody lechery as it merits!"

Having discharged this last arrow of his baffled spleen, the angry Knight, followed by the King's yeomen, strode quickly out of the room, and out of the Convent gate beyond, and out of the present history also.

As the Prior and his company, with their prisoner in their midst, presently followed the Knight's steps, Rosamond, with the strange inconsistency of love and her sex, suddenly uttered a sharp cry and held out her hands toward Bernard, as though she would have drawn him back again; but the young Benedictine either heard her not, or heeded not her appeal to him, for he did not even turn his head to look at her, nor in any way move from the stern attitude of proud reserve wherewith he walked among his captors.

Later on, however, as he was led past the very glade where he and Rosamond had first met, and where so many scenes had since fallen which bound both her and it to his memory, a softer, or at least a sadder, mood took possession of him, and it seemed to him that their beloved Forest, which had once sung so blithely to them on that strange September day when they wandered through the woods together, still whispered its wild music in his ears—albeit its music was now a death-song, and the last that it would ever sing to him.

CHAPTER VIII

A SONG OUT OF SEASON

Our story—at least so far as it concerns us who have manned and steered it—resembles a ship which, after encountering much stormy weather during its voyage, and having in consequence suffered some damage from the wind and waves, such as sprung spars, split sails, and it may be even a small

leak in its coppered bottom—this last due to a sunken reef—at length finds itself sailing in smoother water, and sees the harbour lights at no great distance off. Some of our passengers (to continue the comparison) we have dropped at certain of the ports at which our vessel has called; some we have cast, like Jonahs, overboard, to lighten the craft, and to put the rest into good countenance; and others are still sailing with us, in sight of the land we are almost within hail of, and the pilot-boat that is putting out to us. Our chief passenger, as is the way with passengers——

Here we throw off the mask of our image, which is both false and flimsy, and turn again to the faded leaves of our record, whose strange, ghostly characters seem to remind us that we are neither its captain, nor its helmsman, nor even one of its common crew, but merely a chance stroller on the shore who has set himself the job of deciphering its bottle-preserved log—so long tossed upon the waters—and whose only merit is the clerkly one of clearly and faithfully transcribing it.

Returning to our task, therefore, we find a gap in our Chronicler's account of wellnigh a clear month, and we are solemnly ushered, with a kind of funeral-note little in harmony with that rejoicing season, into the presence of snow-capped and holly-crowned Christmas.

The reason which our Chronicler offers for this pause is very much what might be given for a clock that has stopped through want of winding—his whole purpose in writing the present history being to record the doings of the monk Bernard; and Bernard, as he informs us with a faltering pen,

ever since the eventful day when he had fought a last battle with his fate for life and Rosamond, having lain in the jaws of a devouring sickness—one that was almost, and greater pity that it was not quite, unto death.

In the old Twelfth Century Priory, of which but a few stones remain, there stood beneath the projecting Chapel of our Lady certain chambers, or vaults, which did not form a crypt in the common sense, and which were not underground, but from their position on the sloping fall of the hill received a moderate supply both of light and air. In one of these vaults, on the night of his removal from the Convent, Bernard had been placed, alike for punishment and security; and there he had remained through the long sickness which had afterwards fallen upon him, and which threatened to convert his prison into a death-chamber.

Clement, glad in his sorrow, watched over his stricken friend with the faithfulness that was almost a second soul in him; and Father Hubert, who had begged to share the charge with him, took his place at times by the sick bed, happy to do what he might for the suffering which his conscience accused him of having caused. Better nurses than these two no man in stress of mind or strait of body ever had, and to them, probably, it was owing, aided by the Prior's skilful potions, that the kindly intentions of another friend, not less considerate, were defeated, and that the young Benedictine was enabled to walk again on the Earth he had grown so weary of.

Father Hubert's devotion had the more merit inasmuch as it was a real penance to him—though that view of it brought

him some comfort—to sit there and listen to the sick man's ravings, whose every cry sounded like a reproach to the remorseful spirit of the burly monk. For a long while, indeed, Bernard's soul seemed to be wandering in a tortuous labyrinth of the past, always seeking its way either in or out of it, and always calling, as it blindly roamed through the misty mazes, on the same name—"Rosamond!" Sometimes he appeared to be walking with her in their beloved Forest; and then he would be quiet, only murmuring softly, and now and again lightly laughing to himself, or to her, or it might be to the merry woods that ran along with them. At other times he would be calling loudly on Redwald to do something which the old man could never be got to understand, or else was unable to perform, and Bernard would moan, and turn restlessly in his bed, and clutch at the clothes nervously. Anon, too, he would be in the old soldier's cottage, smiling and talking with Rosamond; and in the midst of this dream of happiness he would presently start up, and with staring eyes, and hands pointing at the wall opposite, shout frantically her name—again, and again, and again—till at last he would fall back exhausted, or be gently drawn down by his attendants, who had often much ado to keep him either in the bed or the room.

By and by the drifting voyager floated out of this troubled sea, and the violent storm gave place to a dead spell of calm, wherein the vessel of life lay a wreck, but saved. Death had yielded the battle, but laughed as it retreated, for the victory was scarce worth claiming. Bernard lived, but not the same Bernard—that—the Bernard of brave deeds, and kindling

passion, and stirring desires—was dead; and but a ghost or skeleton remained, which seemed to mock itself—the man it had been—and to point at its former glory with crooked fingers and gibing jests. In due time the young Benedictine crept forth, as out of a second childhood, from the weakness begot of his long sickness, and his thoughts came back to him; but neither mind nor body was ever his own more—such as he had taken with him to Rosamond and the Convent, and had left there: his strength was like Samson's after the woman had shorn his locks; and his thoughts were like Saul's when the music ceased playing to him—save that the soul of the straitened Hebrew was minded to spend itself in violence, while Bernard was only moved to do nothing.

One night, the eve of that day sacred to God's union with man, Bernard was gently awakened from his dreams by the sound of music over his head. At first he thought it was Rosamond singing to him in the forest; then a company of angels far off in their Heaven; and at last, after some confusing efforts, he remembered that it was Christmas, and that the midnight mass was being chanted in the church above. The building was but a small one, and the chancel not far away, and Bernard, as he lay there—all alone on this occasion, being asleep, and his attendants wanted elsewhere—could hear distinctly the strains of the sacred chant, as the music floated above and beyond him. He even fancied that he could distinguish the different voices—Clement's, and Father Hubert's, and the rest—and thought of the time when he had been with them, and sung there, too, not the least-prized voice of the little choir. This reflection set his tangled thoughts wandering

back to the childhood which had first brought him here; and from that starting-point he travelled upwards again, through all the web of sorrow and disappointment which had wrapt his life around, to the present goal where he was standing, or rather had fallen headlong.

Dimly, and by degrees, the dancing motes of his past floated up and formed a picture, in which his childhood and early youth seemed to be scarcely pencilled, but wherein in lurid colours stood out his mother's bloody death, his battle with and victory over the traitor who had wronged her, Rosamond again and the Forest, Redwald's little cottage, the old Knight's fatal mischance, the Convent beyond that, and——Bernard glanced round at the prison which contained him, its darkness just broken by the faint lamp on the wall over his head, and once more listened to the music that was winging past him on its way to Heaven.

It was Christmas, the season of love, and charity, and reconciliation—of hearts softened towards God, and mercy dropped from Heaven to men. Hands that had parted never to join again, unless in strife, would be clasped now; and feuds forged of iron, and to last like it, would melt and be forgotten, at least forgiven. In this time of pity and pardon the poor would be fed, the homeless housed, and the sinful shriven—all would be made happy and contented so far as man could do it and Heaven would help it. The very snow and cold only served to add to the universal sentiment, which almost seemed begotten of them—alike by the contrast and the purity.

The hymn which the choir were singing overhead told of all these things, and of the great joy of men's hearts, and the

peace, and glory, and goodwill of this blessed season; and Bernard, who neither wept nor laughed as he listened, at length fell asleep with the last dying strains of it, and did not wake again till the dawn, when his opening eyes met the grave face of the Prior, regarding him with a look that was half-stern, half-pitiful.

Our Chronicler, who most likely speaks from his own acquaintance with the subject, has recorded—and we have done the same—that the worthy Prior of St. Giles, albeit the kindest and gentlest of human spirits, could on occasion be as stern, and withal as stiff, as fate itself. We, judging only by the plain letter of the manuscript, were inclined to question this quality in him—or rather, perhaps, it seemed strange to us, and did not over-please us. On the present occasion, at any rate—apart from his own causes of vexation and disappointment—the Prior was not the spokesman of himself alone, but of the whole Church that stood behind him; else, we believe, he would have judged and acted very differently—so differently that this history would never have been written, or written with another ending.

When Bernard opened his eyes, and saw the Prior seated before him, his look betokened no surprise, nor emotion of any kind: he only quietly returned his visitor's gaze, and without speaking; and the latter, either not noticing these signs, or not choosing to do so, said to him—

"I am told that thou art better, my son; and, if thou art now able to bear discourse, I desire to speak with thee on certain matters which concern us both. I pray thee, art thou well enough to converse with me?"

Bernard inclined his head, still without speaking; but, the Prior seeming to expect a more certain reply from him, he presently said in a low voice, that had a strangely hollow sound in it—

"I am well enough, and I can talk with thee as thou desirest me."

The Prior looked surprised at the manner of this answer; but he went on, without paying any heed to it—

"I wished to speak to thee of what happened before this illness of thine, and since the time thou fleddest from thy duties here. Dost thou recollect what hath befallen thee, or hath thy sickness put it from thy remembrance?"

Bernard thought for a few moments, and then he replied in the same measured tones as before—

"I remember all that hath happened to me—I have not forgotten it."

The Prior noticed the change in Bernard's voice and manner, and also another change—that he no longer addressed him by the name of "Father"; but there was no hint of disrespect in the omission, nothing that implied offence or conscious irreverence, and the old man was above making a quarrel over a mere title. Otherwise, he did not quite seem to fathom the case he was prescribing for. Laying his hand on the young monk's shoulder, he said with more of his wonted gentleness—

"I desire not in thy present weakness, my son, to chide thee as thy sins merit; but thou must remember that thou hast dealt very grievously both with God and man, and that it becometh thee—nay, the more so since thou hast been sick,

and exceeding nigh unto death—to repent the evil thou hast done, and to turn thy soul to God Who alone can give it easement, as He hath already given it to thy body. Truly, God hath been very gracious to thee, my son, and thou shouldst return Him gracious thanks this blessed day, in permitting us to heal thy body of the sickness His wisdom sent thee, and so giving thee time for repentance and meet chastening. I trust, my son, thou seest both His mercy and thine own need of it?"

Wherever Bernard's thoughts may have been—in the Forest, or the Convent, or the old Knight's castle—his eyes were fixed on the Prior's face, and he seemed to be following every word that fell from him. As the latter's last sentence was put in the form of a question the young Benedictine had to reply to it, and he said quietly, and withal somewhat wearily—

"If I have done any wrong I am sorry for it, and——"

"*If*, my son!" interrupted the Prior sternly. "God have mercy on thee, and pluck thee—as He alone can—from the hand of Satan that holdeth thee! Dost thou dare—thou, who hast done things which would shame a common sinner of this vain world, an open rebel against God and His sacred laws—how much more thee, a sworn servant of His Church, and a chosen follower of our Blessed Lord!—dost thou dare to doubt the evil thou hast been guilty of? Verily, my son, thou art in grievous peril of God's judgment, and it had been better for thee to have died in thy young cradle—ay, and I would in mercy thou hadst even done so!"

For the first time a light flashed in Bernard's eyes as he listened to these last words, and he answered them with a fervent "Amen!" that almost startled the Prior, so different

was the sound of it from his former utterances. Something in it moved the old man's pity, and the sternness partly passed from his face as he said earnestly—

"Alas! my son, thou didst almost come to me from thy cradle, and how many tears have I shed over thee, how many prayers have I sent to God for thee, that thou mightest prove faithful to thy sacred trust, and fulfil the promise which thy young years gave of thee! Even now, on this blessed morn, when the air is full of angels' voices, and God's feet touch again the Earth they once deigned to walk on—even now, my son, I bring thee a message of peace and pardon, which God refuseth not to the worst of sinners, and which thou hast but to stretch out thy hand and humbly take, and He will give it to thee—yea, and He will let thee into the fold again from which thou hast slipped! Lo! His hand is on the gate, and He graciously beckoneth thee to come and enter—only run to meet Him, my son, and let not God smile in vain on thee!"

Either Bernard was greatly prostrated by his sickness, or his heart was very hardened, for not merely did he make no sign of accepting the gracious offer vouchsafed him, but he even returned no answer to the Prior's appeal—only regarding his visitor with the same fixed gaze he had all along bent on him. Apparently the old man thought that this apathy was owing to the second of the above causes, for the kindly expression once more left his face, and it was in a severer tone than had yet fallen from him that he said—

"I perceive, my son, that thy heart is stubbornly set against God and His gracious dealings with thee, and I can only trust that thine eyes will be opened to see better when thy sinful

body is purged of its present lust which doth choke and hinder it. Verily, till that be wrought in thee, I can do no more to lead thee to the blessed light thou now spreadest thy foolish hands to hide from thee."

The Prior paused a while, and then he continued gravely—

"I have now, my son, to speak with thee on another matter, which, even were thy heart as open to Heavenly grace as unhappily it is darkly straitened, must needs go before the mercy that God offereth thee—I mean, my son, the punishment meet for the grievous sins thou hast been guilty of. Truly, thou hast offended very deeply, not only against thine own soul and the souls of thy fellow men, but also against our Holy Religion, and our Holy Church which thou unworthily servest. As I once warned thee, thy little flame hath kindled into a consuming fire, and the end of it is not easily to be reckoned. So much hath thy thoughtless lust, thy foolish itching for the fruit forbidden thee, wrought against both God and thine own soul; and hadst thou fallen, as indeed thou almost didst, into the hands of the world which claimed to judge thee, and which would have served thee as do the wild birds a truant cageling—verily, thou wouldst have been cut off in thy sins, and from the grace God is yet willing to bestow on thee! By Heaven's mercy that evil stroke hath been hindered; and we, who minister God's love as well as dispense His justice, are minded to show thee more tenderness than the world thou wast so flattered with, and whose vain sweets—yea, they had proved very bitter to thee, my son!—thy silly mouth hath so watered after."

The Prior again paused, as though to give the offending

monk another chance of acknowledging the favours which God and man had vouchsafed to him; but, receiving no more reply than before, he went on—

"Methinks thou knowest, my son, that the misdeeds thou hast been guilty of were the occasion of a warm debate between his Grace of Canterbury and our lord the King; and thou moreover knowest that it was not without much labour, and withal some peril, that we were able to prevail in shielding thee from the King's judgment, and likewise from the shame and chastisement which the King was minded to visit on thee."

The Prior here looked at Bernard, but, seeing no sign in his face either of consent or contradiction, he presently added—

"Nevertheless, my son, a great scandal hath been caused both in the Church and the world at large, and I have had much earnest talk with his Grace concerning thee, and also concerning the means we may best employ to quiet the profane tongues which are now wagging against us. Thy sin was done in the world, my son, and against those that are of the world: wherefore must thy punishment be there also, and in the sight of all men. Moreover, his Grace and I deem it fitting that thy fault should be purged in that same place where thy lustful lips did feast on the wicked fruit of it, so thou mayest think upon thy sin whilst thou art suffering pains for it, and have it ever before thine eyes and in thy remembrance. Therefore, my son, so soon as thy strength permitteth thee, thou art to walk humbly, and with bare head, unto yonder hill that overlooketh the house thou didst lately dwell in, and

wherein thy sin was compassed: which hill thou art to climb on thy bended knees, and in like fashion descend from it, making at each step meet petitions to God Whom thou hast offended; and this act thou art to continue each day, and in all seasons, until such time as we shall judge sufficient for thy soul's chastening."

During all this interview, save for one brief instant, Bernard had displayed the same quiet air of unconcern; like a man bound out of courtesy to listen to a tedious tale, but otherwise indifferent to what was passing beyond him. Casting about us to find a comparison which would give a notion of this strange state of his, we could think of nothing better than that of a solitary sentinel—the last of all the garrison left alive—in some deserted fortress, who for some cause is unable, or unwilling, to quit his post, and who, while disdaining to hurl himself from the battlements, waits anxiously for Death to come and relieve him. The last words of the Prior roused Bernard from this apathy as not all the old man's counsels and censures had done; and when presently asked whether, for his soul's weal and the purging of his offence, he would submit cheerfully to what was adjudged him, he once more startled his questioner by the sudden animation that came over him. Stretching out his arm, whose sinewy shape had wondrously wasted in his short sickness, he exclaimed eagerly—

"I am ready now—see—I am quite strong enough. I pray thee—there is no need for waiting."

As he heard this answer the Prior looked more keenly at his patient, and for the first time seemed to be in doubt of his

prescription: in the end, however, he appeared satisfied, and only said—

"I am glad, my son, that thou art come to a better mind. We will wait till thou art a little stronger, and will then appoint thee a day whereon to begin thy prescribed punishment."

At this moment the bells overhead pealed forth a joyous summons, and the Prior hastened to answer it, and to take his part in the blessed service which was to recall to men's minds the World's gift from Heaven of peace, and goodwill, and Divine freedom.

Presently a hymn of joy and glory, suited to that glad season, burst from the choir above, and swelling onwards, upwards—downwards, too—filled the lonely prison-cell, and the ears of the sick man who lay listening to it; and who perhaps thought it a mockery, or maybe thought not at all about it, but in any case, being very sad and weary, by and by fell asleep to its measured strains, and so was found by his friend Clement, who in due course came to watch over him.

CHAPTER IX

THE FALLING OF THE SHADOW

THE Raggedstone is not a hill of any great height, neither is it of any great boldness—at least, not in comparison with one even of our own mountains, amongst which it makes no claim

to be reckoned. None the less it is an interesting hill, and seen on a stormy day, or a dull one, with the mist half-shrouding it, and its broad humps looming out darkly, it has an aspect of weirdness, and also a strange sort of dignity, which is partly owing to its shape, and partly to its loneliness. In form it is double-peaked, the two points being transverse—that is, they look east and west—to the line of the range, and a considerable space apart; a wide, shallow valley running up between them, which continues its course on the other side, dipping down southward towards the last of the chain, after it has slipped past them. The slopes of the hill are here and there dotted, although hardly more so than some of its neighbours, with rough stones or projecting rock; from which perhaps it has its name, or else from a shaggy lump of granite on the eastern peak, a rock we have already spoken of as resembling—at any rate, to our fancy—a couchant lion. To this point, from the main gully on its northern side, a curious track leads up—not a fashioned path, but merely a kind of flattened ridge following the form of the turfy slope, and looking very much as though it had been worn by generations of passing feet.

If, however, the Raggedstone is not very remarkable in itself, it has a history which is remarkable, and a human mystery clings to it which gives it an interest beyond most other hills; for from that same eastern peak of it we have been describing, on a certain Autumn day of the Twelfth Century, a distracted soul cast the burden of a great sorrow upon the world beneath—which ever since has had to suffer it, and seemingly is destined to do so evermore, until both

bearer and burden be rolled away and cleared, like a frown, from the face of Universe.

* * * * *

Through the snows of Winter, over the hard upland ground where the teeth of the frost were deepest set and bit most sharply; in all weathers, and in all humours; with bleeding knees and blistered feet, and spirit weary and wounded as either—every day of his bitter life Bernard crawled, more like a beast than a man, from the base of that accurst hill where lay the shrine of his dead joy, to its summit where he hoped to find the bourn, but as yet had not, of his living sorrow.

Still he travailed on, living yet, his eternal task not yet finished—through the gentle-tempered Spring, whose birds sang unheeded to him, and whose flowers sprang unnoticed under his bruised feet, and whose soft winds bore up to him from the leafy Forest that magic music which at length seemed to repent its silence, but which his ears would never again listen to.

Still on, through the burning Summer, with the cooling rills all dried, and the turf withered under his seared knees, and his bare head reeling beneath the blistering sunbeams—Heaven above and Earth below uniting to torment and torture him—still he lived through it all; a miracle to the gaping mortals who chanced to see him; a pity and wonder to the angels who passed over him, and perchance dropped their tears on him.

* * * * *

At the close of that particular Autumn * day above spoken

* The original description might point either to a day in early Autumn, or to one still in Summer.

of, two figures, both in ecclesiastical dress but widely differing, might have been seen watching the unfortunate monk's progress up the doomful hill, and holding debate alike on him and his occupation. One of these was the worthy Prior of St. Giles: the other, no less a personage than his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury. The latter had been listening to a somewhat long account from his companion, who had apparently been pleading on behalf of the miserable object they were looking at, and he presently said to the Prior—

"I have received thy letters, Reverend Father, concerning this unhappy servant of thine, and truly I am not lacking in compassion; but the scandal his crimes have caused hath been exceeding grievous—yea, thou knowest how I am even now engaged in a sore struggle with the State, which he and such as he have by their loose deeds occasioned, and an example was much needed to restrain others from a like indulgence: wherefore I judged it fitting to continue his present punishment at least until thou wert able to report a better change in him; for, as I understand from thine accounts, he still persisteth in his stubborn silence, and showeth not any sign of amendment."

The Prior sighed deeply as he looked at the subject of this enquiry, and he answered in a sad tone—

"Truly, my lord, I know not what to make of him. He hath been as your Grace now seeth him, and as I have acquainted you by my letters, ever since the sickness which first fell on him. As for signs of repentance, he scarce speaketh a word to any one, save only to a young Brother of our House for whom he hath a special liking, and of late but little even

to him. I often marvel, my lord, whether his mind be not affected by his illness, or by those sorrows which he hath—however vainly and wrongly, as God wotteth—suffered his thoughts to dwell upon; for it is assuredly very strange in one of his temper—which is exceeding proud and fiery, my lord—to submit so quietly as he doth, and alway hath done, to this penance that is laid on him. I know not if he indeed desireth to end his life by the means we have thus set him, but I have sometimes had suspicion of it."

Becket mused thoughtfully for a few moments. In a while he said—

"It is a pity—verily, it is a pity! Even now he seemeth a noble youth, and from what thou sayest 'tis like he might have done much good, whether for us or for the world he so greatly itched after."

Here the Primate paused, and then suddenly added—

"If I rightly remember, Reverend Father, he hath been guilty of three particular offendings. Firstly, he slew that disgrace to knighthood who slandered his mother and caused her death; and methinks for that, whatever we may say to him and the world, as our duty requireth, in our private hearts we think no worse of him. Secondly, he fell in love with a fair maiden whom he rescued from his scamp of a brother. That, like the other matter, befitted not a monk; but some grace may be allowed his youth and hot blood, and I mind me thou didst thyself tell the King how he designed no evil to the damsel, and was partly forced—not that the thing was thereby made excusable, but yet there was some show of excuse for it—into the unholy union he afterwards contrived

with her. Lastly, there was the murder of the old Knight Sir Edmund Dunstan; and that, Reverend Father, sticketh the most of all his trippings. Dost thou believe he really shed the old man's blood? I confess I like not to think it of him, and it accordeth strangely with one of his race and noble temper."

The Prior was much surprised at this show of leniency in his great chief, and he replied eagerly—

"No, my lord, I never did believe it of him. I have known him since he was a young child, and his faults—being a monk, my lord, and not otherwise—were those of a knight, but not of a coward and assassin. He himself, before this sickness fell upon him, informed the Brother he is attached to that the old Knight, Sir Edmund, met his death by a strange accident—to wit, that, having sent for him, and seeking to kill him, and he but thinking to defend himself till he had reached the door and made his escape, the Knight ran suddenly upon his weapon, and so was pierced by it; and, as God judgeth me, my lord, I believe the tale, though I seek not to defend him from his evil doings."

"And I also believe it," answered Becket with some warmth, "albeit, the harm occasioned us hath been none the less, nor could we, for the sake of justice and the Church's welfare, have visited his offence less sharply; but now——"

The Primate again broke off, and then said abruptly—

"I like the youth, Reverend Father, both from what I have myself seen of him, and from what thou tellest me; and, by our Lady, I like not to see him crawling yonder as a sorry beast might—he, whose father was a brave knight, and

himself——truly I fear, as thou sayest, that he must have lost his wits, to bear so meekly with it!"

The Prior was about to reply, when Becket once more said to him with the same abruptness—

"How thinkest thou, Reverend Father? What sayest thou to sending him to us when the cloud hath a little cleared which now covereth him? None will know him or his misdeeds when he leaveth this neighbourhood, and perchance I could find work for him better fitted to his tastes and temper."

"I accept your Grace's offer gladly," returned the Prior in a voice full of emotion, "and, though I shall be sorry to part with him, I own that my hopes for him are at an end, and that he will never bear good blossom here—nay, every day he withereth more and more, and I have been sore straitened in my heart as to his present chastisement which your Grace and I—I would fain trust with the approval of Heaven—have laid upon him."

"He hath certainly little likeness to the champion which slew Sir Eustace," answered Becket with a grim smile; "but let that pass—verily he hath suffered enough, Reverend Father, and it troubleth me to look on him. I pray thee, let this be his last journey to yonder strange peak he is now climbing."

The Prior very readily assented to a proposal which he had himself prompted; and then the Primate added, pointing to the valley below them—

"I have to call, Reverend Father, at yonder Court on my way to Gloucester, and I would fain talk with thee a little further on these matters. Hast thou leisure to bear me company for a short distance?"

The Prior no less willingly agreed to this proposal than he had done to the others, and the two Churchmen presently descended the hill, and, mounting the mules which were awaiting them at its foot, were soon on their way to that very hamlet of Birts Morton mentioned in the prologue to this history.

Meanwhile two other figures were watching the ill-starred monk, who had by this time nearly reached the eastern peak to which the Primate had just pointed. One of these—the veteran Redwald—had indeed become almost as much a part of the hill as was Bernard himself, for he never left it until the latter's task was ended, and each day saw him as regularly at his post as a soldier on duty, following every movement of his unhappy master, and oftentimes running before him to pluck the stones and briars from his path—wearing, moreover, his own heart away with the rueful spectacle. Clement also, who was now standing by the old man's side, came as often as his rules permitted him, and did what he could by word and deed to soothe his forlorn friend; sorrowful, like the old soldier, that he could do so little, and that that little was scarcely heeded. A third figure was there besides—the faithful Rollo; whose tawny countenance seemed to wear as pathetic a look of wonder as either of the human ones, and who would sometimes steal up to his young master and lick his stooping face, an affectionate appeal which Bernard neither hindered nor regarded.

Something this day in the young monk's appearance struck his two friends as strangely different even from what it had been. Long ere now his form had shrunk to a mere semblance of its old strength and comeliness, and his face had grown white

and pinched, a shadow of the buxom picture Nature had painted; but to-day there was the very glamour of death on it, and, as Redwald and his companion gazed shudderingly at the wreck before them, the old soldier exclaimed passionately—

"Look at him, Master Clement! See what these damned fiends have made of him! He the son of a knight and gentleman, and himself as stout and brave as any knight that ever drove lance at target—to be brought to this pass—to be put to play at mule's work without the uses of it; and by a set of damned, lousy monks—thou must e'en pardon me, Master Clement, but I reckon not thee one of them—that are scarce fit to clean his father's arms for him! God in Heaven, look at him!" continued the old man, clenching his hands till they bled, and plucking out his grey hairs with trembling fury. "Why, the very devils would not torture a man like this! I tell thee, Master Clement, they have clean driven the wits from him! Dost thou think, else, that a son of my old master, and such a one—God, to see what they have made of him!—would stoop to do this vile thing they have put him to?"

Clement did not speak for some moments, but only grasped the old man's hand in token of their common sympathy. At last he said in a broken voice—

"I agree with thee—verily, I believe men have no pity. Let us pray to God for him. Perchance He will hear us, and send help to our unhappy brother."

"God!" returned the old soldier with bitter contempt. "What is God doing to let a man be tortured like this, and by his brother men, too—ay, and the very men that preach Heaven's love and mercy to us? By our Lady, Master

Clement, 'tis enough to make one doubt all the three of them!"

Here Redwald, unable to bear longer the sight and thoughts that stirred him, went quickly up to his young master, and, kneeling down by his side, said in an imploring tone—

"Speak to me, Master Cuthbert—for God's sake, speak to me, and say if I cannot do something for thee! Thou knowest that I would give my life for thee, or go to the world's end for thee—ay, or——" Then, as Bernard, after his wont, made no answer, he added—"Master Cuthbert, Master Cuthbert, thou wilt break my heart! I wot thou art not angered with me because I did not tend thee during thy sickness in yonder curst House of thine. Truly, as I have often told thee, I went to see thee every day—ay, and many times a day—but they would not let me in to speak a word to thee, neither for threats nor fair talking; and I could do no more than ask after thee, which God bear me witness I did every day, ay, and many times a day—I swear by God, Master Cuthbert, I did no less for thee!"

Bernard still made no answer to his faithful follower's appeal, but only moved forwards a little on his monotonous journey; and the old man, crawling after him like a dog after its master, said again—

"Why wilt thou let them put thee to this hound's work of theirs, Master Cuthbert? Mass, 'tis not fit for the like of thee—a man that hath worsted such a knight as Sir Eustace Devereux, and won the heart of so fair a lady as Mistress Rosamond! Ay, and thou wilt win her again, Master Cuthbert, I'll warrant thee! Only say the word, my dear young

master, and we will fly this cursed place, and I promise thee——"

The old man stopped abruptly, for a change had come over Bernard's face which frightened him, and which caused Clement also to spring forward and offer help—he knew not what, and scarce why—to his beloved companion. The young Benedictine had suddenly started to his feet, and, in the rift that for a moment broke through the dark cloud which had so long hidden him, both his speech and something of his old energy seemed to have come back again. Stretching out his wasted arm towards the valley below him, and with a wild look, but withal as stern as wild, and with a dying gleam of prophecy in it, he exclaimed in tones which were never forgotten by those that heard them—

"My curse be on thee, thou Heaven-blasting hill, and on those which laid this burden on me, and on all that be like as they are! May thy shadow and my shadow never cease to fall upon them, and upon this place that holdeth them! And may their sorrows be as my sorrow, their joys as my joy, their end as my end, so long as one of my blood remaineth to bear witness for me against them!"

Bernard continued standing for a few moments after uttering this curse, his outstretched hand still pointing to the valley, moving first in the direction of the little Priory where he had lived and suffered, and then towards the Convent where his one joy had for ever parted from him; lastly, waving over the plain at his feet—over that very spot in it to which the Prior and his fellow-traveller had just turned their steps. For a short while he thus stood, the sternness gathering upon his

face, and his stretched-out arm pointing with yet more intensity —then, suddenly, his features unbent themselves, and his rigid frame was seized with trembling, and the next instant he staggered and fell back heavily to the ground. In a twinkling his two companions were kneeling by his side, calling upon Heaven for its mercy, and doing all that men might to stay the struggling life in him; but the task was beyond the cunning of men, and Heaven seemed not minded to help in it. For one moment, indeed, Bernard lifted his head, and looked down the sloping track to where lay the old soldier's cottage; and as he did so a softer expression came over him, while his lips murmured faintly the last word that ever stirred on them—"Rosamond!"

The old man sprang to his feet with a wild cry of grief and rage, while his gentler comrade in affliction still knelt by his lost friend, and wept and prayed over him; but soon both were interrupted and awed into silence by a sudden darkening of the air around them, and, looking up, they beheld a strange column of dusky cloud which seemed to be rising from the very ground where Bernard lay, and which almost appeared to resemble the form of the dead monk swelled to a Titan size —at least, to the scared eyes of its two witnesses there was something human in it, something, moreover, terribly unlike aught either of Earth or Heaven. The weird shadow, however, rested not on them, but, having presently risen above the hill-peak from which it had issued, strode slowly and with measured pace towards the valley that cowered below it.

As with awed hearts and strained eyes the frightened watchers marked its ghostly progress, one arm of this

monstrous shape seemed to be stretched out northwards over the church and monastery of Saint Giles, while the other pointed downwards to the little cottage at the hill's base; but the great body of the strange apparition moved steadily onwards across the valley and to the south-east, and ere long hung over the very place where the Prior and his brother Churchman were then standing—still following them, and hanging over them, and never once stirring from them, until the falling night at length came in mercy to hide its loathed presence from their marvelling gaze.

EPILOGUE

When I had at length made an end of deciphering and copying the foregoing history, I thought of again paying a visit to my new friend—by this time almost an old one—Mr. Aldrich. Until the task was completed I had avoided seeing him, or indeed any other friend, so that nothing might disturb my absorption in the subject; but now I felt a strong desire to look once more on him and his little boy, and also on the scene of the mysterious legend. A year had passed since my last meeting with him, when he had entrusted the faded record of his unfortunate ancestor to my care; and it seemed to me that in seeing him, and the young child who was his sole companion, I should find something to remind me of the ill-starred monk my thoughts were now filled and brimming over with. Beyond that, I wanted his help regarding several matters in the history, more especially as concerned the notes which were added, by several hands, to the margins of the ancient manuscript.

With no little excitement, then, and carrying the cherished record, I set forth one morning on my proposed errand, and was fortunate enough, as I approached the well-remembered garden-gate, to see my friend advancing from his door, with

hand stretched out to welcome me. His face was paler than when I had last seen him, and his look more melancholy, but he received me none the less pleasantly, and almost in a jocular tone bade me enter the house and renew its acquaintance.

"I see," he said, "that you are as good as your word, and have brought back this precious witness to our family doom."

"I am sorry to have kept it so long," I replied, "but I can assure you that I have lost no time over it. I have worked at nothing else, and thought of nothing else, and yet it has taken me a year and a month to bring it back to you."

For answer he laughed a laugh such as I thought his progenitor Bernard might have done when the old soldier proposed a fire to keep the wolves off.

"While you have been writing of it," he said, "I have *seen* the shadow: so you must own that, if you were busy, I have not been idle."

Then, seeing the scared look in my face, he added—

"But do not let that spoil your welcome here. It does not trouble me, and it is now almost old enough to make a fresh note to this ancient record. Come, let us go into the house, and talk over your acquaintance with my great ancestor."

He led me into the house, and into the room where I had last talked with him; and there I found his little boy, who, as he came running to bid me welcome, brought to my mind what Bernard might have been soon after his entrance into the hated Priory. My host noticed the interest with which I thus regarded this "last of the Alderics," and he said with an amused smile, but in a tone whose gravity was in odd contrast—

"He is the last leaf of a blighted tree. Does he remind you, now that you have read the history, of our unlucky ancestor, the hero of the weird Shadow?" *

I replied that, whether it were fancy, or my thoughts being full of the subject, he did remind me of Bernard, and I quoted the Abbess' description of the latter as she had known him when a little child. Mr. Aldrich again smiled, and said that it was likely enough, and that he believed the blood had not much changed in them, but only the circumstances. Then he asked me how I had got on with my task, and if I had found the work troublesome.

"I found myself before two straits," I answered. "To have given the old writing just as it was penned would have been ridiculous, and to have merely turned it into modern English would have ill-suited the subject. Between these extremes, therefore, I have sought to steer—I have faithfully rendered every reflection and circumstance, and, as nearly as might be, every expression, in language that is sufficiently old to match the matter, yet, I trust, modern enough to be readable; and in doing this I make no pretence to historical accuracy, many of the terms employed, and perhaps some of the titles, either not being in use at the time of the story, or having had a different meaning. All I have tried to do has been to use a language fairly true to the spirit of the history, and that I

* In the longer "Prologue," referred to in the introduction to this history, mention is made of Mr. Aldrich's fancy as to a resemblance between his little boy and their unfortunate ancestor; certain qualities, both of mind and body, strongly showing in the child, which my host persuaded himself bore a likeness to those of the strange hero of the legend.

think I have done: the facts and thoughts recorded I can vouch for having truly given."

"I think you could have taken no other course," said Mr. Aldrich; "but perhaps you had better put a note of this on the first page of your book, so as to save trouble to your critics."

"Speaking of notes," I said, not quite sure whether my host himself were not playing the critic with me, "reminds me of what I most wanted to talk to you about. Can you tell me by whose hands these notes were written which appear on the margins of the manuscript?"

"Nothing of a certainty," replied Mr. Aldrich, turning over the leaves of the old record as he spoke. "This one, which you see opposite the account of my ancestor's seizure, or rather surrender, in the Convent, is evidently by the same hand as the rest of the history."

"I remarked that," said I, "and it relates that Rosamond died later on—in fact, she must have died near about the same time as her lover—soon after giving birth to the child who I suppose was the first settler of your family in this village?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Aldrich, "and the tradition in our family agrees with the note. The sin and sorrow he was born in seemed to thrive with him, for by all accounts he was a sturdy little knave, and inherited his father's sinews. He was brought up in the Convent, and afterwards in the Priory; but they did not try to make a monk of him, nor, I believe, of any other of our family. Later on, as the note also tells us, he settled in this village, and the old soldier, Redwald, went to

live with him. The money which the old man had received from the boy's grandfather sufficed to build this house, and to buy a moderate estate to go along with it; and that is all I can tell you of our second ancestor."

"And the lady called Edith, she who went with Rosamond to the Convent?" I asked eagerly. "Can you tell me anything concerning her?"

"There is a note you have not seen," answered my host, "which hints that after Rosamond's death she took the veil, and lived to be Abbess of the very Convent they had sought refuge in. The note, however, is by a later hand, and was lying loose among the leaves of the history when we found it. There is no tradition, nor aught else, to bear it out."

"There is one other note," said I presently, "which I should like to ask you about, and whether you have any tradition relating to it. It is in the same handwriting as the history, and refers to the first appearance of the weird Shadow, and the two persons it first fell upon."

"I think that hardly needs confirmation," replied Mr. Aldrich. "The man who wrote this history—and I doubt not you have made a guess as to his identity—knew the personages he speaks of, and the note is certainly by his hand. He tells us that the Prior died within a year following the mysterious visitation; and as for the Primate, everybody knows what soon afterwards happened to him. Undoubtedly they were the two first victims of the curse, though, to our sorrow, not the last ones. Tradition, however, points to that episode as one of the reasons for the Shadow's appearance ever since in this

place *—the other, of course, being the presence of our family here."

This last reference led me to make a further enquiry as to the hint my host had dropped at the beginning of our interview. He now told me that since our meeting in the previous Autumn—indeed, not very long after it—the weird Shadow had fallen upon him. Like his father, and his wife and child also, he had been walking in the direction of the doomed hill when the thing had happened, and the attendant phenomena were so exactly the same as in their case that he would not repeat them to me; but I could see, in spite of his smiles and attempted indifference, that the circumstance weighed heavily on his spirits, and that he had no doubt in his own mind that the fatal "call" of his family had come to him. I said all I could to disabuse him of the sinister notion, and to put it from his thoughts, but in vain. I saw that he believed in it almost as in a religion, and, if I had spoken the truth, I think I had got to believe in it, too. At last I said desperately—

"I cannot think, as I once before said to you, why you persist in remaining in this place which you believe to be so fatal to your race and your own family."

"And I," rejoined Mr. Aldrich, "can only answer you as I did then—that Heaven only knows, for I do not. I suppose it must be fate, and you cannot wonder if my family are fatalists."

* The famous Cardinal Wolsey is the best-known "victim" of the weird visitation. It is related that the Shadow once fell on him as he was sleeping in the orchard of Birts Morton Court, where he was then chaplain, and his subsequent misfortunes and death were commonly attributed to this cause.

After a moment's silence he said further—

"You remember the postscript to the curse? Truly, the monk's prayer seems to have been granted, for his blood *has* witnessed against those he hated, and I doubt the Shadow will never rest so long as a soul of us is left to speak for him. But the curse, like the shadow, was cut in halves. Heaven forced one hand of the fatal cloud to point at *us*, and it has fallen as heavily on my ancestor's own race as on the enemies he sought to punish by it. After all, however, as the old soldier said, the monks or his sorrows had driven him mad; in which case I suppose the Devil, who certainly appears to have a sovereignty to himself, must have had the working of it."

I was much struck with this strange fatality which my host here referred to, but I did not pursue it, being anxious to lead him from the subject, or at least to make a suggestion concerning his own share in the mystery which I thought would be of some comfort to him.

"I do not believe," I said, "that this thing will really happen to you, or that your allotted life will be cut short a single day"—my host smiled a bitter assent to this postulate—"but supposing, for whim's sake only, that it should indeed be as you fear, I would gladly know if there is any service which I could render you or yours in such a misfortune. Both out of personal friendship," I added warmly, "even though ours is but a short one, and for the great interest I feel in your family, which I somehow seem to have known for centuries, I should be glad to be of any help to you."

Mr. Aldrich held out his hand to me, and he seemed more affected than I had yet seen him, as he replied—

"I thank you from my heart for your proffered kindness. For myself, I think I have already told you that the Shadow has no terrors for me, and that I desire nothing more than to join my wife and child in yonder far-off land whither they have travelled before me." He pointed eastwards as he spoke, as though to some distant haven beyond the reach of the baleful cloud, and then continued—"But for this little fellow (the boy was playing at this moment on the lawn outside the window), in case I should be taken, and I *shall* be taken, I would gladly accept your offer. I know well that it is selfish to close so promptly with a kind impulse; but although, as you have just said, we are almost strangers, you speak like a friend, and I have scarce another one. If, therefore, you will take this trouble—for it will be the trouble only: of money the little fellow will have sufficient—I shall be indeed grateful, and you will make the Shadow to fall lightly on me."

I told him that I would undertake the trust willingly, and that he might depend, in case of the event he feared, on my doing all for his little boy which he would himself have desired to do. I then added—

"I will not promise you one thing, however: I will not bind myself to keep him in this house, or in this neighbourhood."

"Neither will I bind you to do it," he answered with a laugh; "and that is why I shall be glad for a stranger to have the charge of him, for a stranger will perhaps be able to do what our family could never yet do—fly from the weird Shadow."

He then promised to have the necessary documents, authorizing both my guardianship and trusteeship, prepared; and soon afterwards I bade him farewell, and took my departure.

The time is not long since I saw Mr. Aldrich, and his fears are not yet fulfilled, nor do I know whether they ever will be. This, however, I do know—should it please Heaven to give me the charge of his little boy, the last link of that strange chain, my first care will be to remove him from the house where he was born, and where his family have so long dwelt, to some place beyond the reach of that arch-enemy and evil genius of his race—the fateful SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE.

THE END

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